



THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT  
1997-2021



Kinder Institute on  
Constitutional Democracy  
University of Missouri

*Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power*

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Report 2021—20

# THE OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF

David B. Cohen, *The University of Akron*

Charles E. Walcott, *Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University*

## 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 .

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*“Working in the White House is the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life, bar none.” –White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, May 11, 2018<sup>1</sup>*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As recently as the beginning of the Carter administration, it was possible to argue that the White House could be run without a chief of staff (COS).<sup>2</sup> Those days are gone. The complexity of the modern White House requires discipline and coordination that can only be achieved if there is a central coordinating point, someone other than the president to oversee the operation. This job is not easy. Long days, constant crises, persistent institutional rivalries, overlapping missions and interests, and the roles of the personnel that occupy the White House, create a pressured short time-frame in which to operate. Many chiefs and other experts see their job as the second most important and most difficult second only to the president in Washington. To underline the point, James A. Baker, III, who served as chief of staff under two presidents, includes the chief of staff, along with the director of presidential personnel, and the counsel, as the three jobs that should be filled first, because these people have “got to help the president pick the rest of the administration.”<sup>3</sup>

### ROLES

There is general agreement on the critical missions the COS and Office of the Chief of Staff must oversee and the best practices associated with them. These, while interrelated, fall into two broad categories: managerial and advisory.

#### *Managerial roles*

- a) Select the key people on the White House staff, and oversee them

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<sup>1</sup> John Burnett, “Transcript: White House Chief of Staff’s Interview with NPR,” *National Public Radio*, May 11, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> This briefing paper is an updated version of the briefing paper on the same topic written for the 2000 transition. For the original piece, see Charles E. Walcott, Shirley Anne Warshaw, and Stephen J. Wayne, “The Chief of Staff,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31, #3, September 2001. pp.464-89.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

- b) Structure the White House staff system, including the Office of the Chief of Staff, typically with deputies for both operations and policy
- c) Control the flow of people and paper into the Oval Office, adjusting it to the president's style of doing business
- d) Manage the flow of information and opinion to and from the president and do so in a way that brokers honestly among differing perspectives and recommendations

#### *Advisory roles*

- a) Advise the president on issues of politics, policy and management
- b) Protect the interests of the president
- c) Defend the president as a proxy to the media, Congress, and other constituency groups
- d) Negotiate with the external environment, including Congress, the executive branch, extra-governmental political groups and individuals, and media.

### OPERATING STYLES AND ENVIRONMENTS

Although they agree on the roles, former White House officials do not agree on a single, "best" way for a chief of staff to carry out their duties. Some of their disagreement stems from the differing people and circumstances involved. The exact nature of the chief of staff job will depend upon such things as:

- a) Presidential styles
- b) Chief of staff style and skillset
- c) The circumstances in which they inherited their job
- d) The personnel with whom they had to contend and budget they had to administer
- e) Partisanship (precedents and advice from earlier administrations)

Variations in the White House environment also naturally affect organizational arrangements, operational procedures, and personnel decisions. Such factors include the shape of the staff, particularly at the time the chief assumes office, coordination with other White House units, and the structure of day-to-day activities that must vary with the president's style, decisional time frame, and to some extent, the administration's priorities. A chief's role is a reflection of the president and if that chief of staff had a relationship with the president prior to becoming chief. The COS is always limited by the president's preferences, views, and habits of management and leadership.

Nevertheless, incoming chiefs of staff can try to negotiate with the president to define their sphere of influence. Andrew Card, George W. Bush's first chief of staff, observed that although some journalists were describing the relationship among him, Senior Adviser Karl Rove, and Counselor Karen Hughes as a "troika" of equals, "I told the President that if he wanted to have a troika he should have a troika, but I didn't want to be one of the three; I would be out. I felt very strongly that the chief of staff should be *the* chief of staff, not *one of the* chiefs of staff."<sup>4</sup>

### PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES, STRATEGIES, AND TACTICS

In addition to role, structure, and processes, certain personal attributes, political strategies, and operational tactics are more likely than others to be successful. *Decisiveness, sensitivity, credibility, political savvy, and toughness* are essential traits for the job.

Strategies based on realistic assumptions about public expectations, those that correctly anticipate elite and public reactions, and those that consider the mood of the country and are designed to work within the broad parameters of public opinion are more apt to achieve the

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Andrew H. Card, Jr. by David B. Cohen, October 25, 2007.

desired goal. Similarly, tactics that incorporate the president's bully pulpit to gain political leverage, that see information as an instrument of power, are also most likely to be successful in today's public-media environment.

There is also general agreement on the dangers that may be encountered. Warnings to future chiefs echoed difficulties that tend to be intrinsic to the job. We explore these areas of agreement and disagreement in our summary of advice to future chiefs of staff.

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## INTRODUCTION

The White House Office of the Chief of Staff is crucial to the successful operation of the contemporary presidency. Former President Gerald Ford explained:

I started out in effect not having an effective chief of staff and it didn't work. So anybody who doesn't have one and tries to run the responsibilities of the White House I think is putting too big a burden on the president himself. You need a filter, a person that you have total confidence in who works so closely with you that in effect his is almost an alter ego. I just can't imagine a president not having an effective chief of staff.<sup>5</sup>

Ford's second chief of staff, Richard Cheney, elaborated on the need for effective White House organization:

Well, it's crucial in terms of how he's going to function as president, whether or not he's effective. His reach, his ability to sort of guide and direct the government, to interact with the cabinet, to deal effectively with the Congress, to manage his relationship with the press, all of those are key ingredients to his success. The White House staff structure and set up and how it functions as an organization determines whether or not he is successful in these relationships. No matter how hard he works or how smart he might be, he can't do it by himself.<sup>6</sup>

The job of the White House chief of staff has many common elements from one administration to the next. But there are also key differences, resulting mainly from different presidents' work styles and beliefs about how the White House should operate. Perhaps the new chief's most important job is simply to find out what the job entails. For instance, Thomas "Mack" McLarty, Bill Clinton's first chief, reported that after talking to most of his predecessors about the job, James Baker, COS for both Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, told him, "Well, Mack, you just kind of have to be there."<sup>7</sup>

A chief's understanding of the job should arise out of close communication between the new president and chief of staff, since the president defines the chief's role. But there is great value in understanding the basic nature of the job, the possible variations in its performance, and, above all, the pitfalls that any chief of staff must avoid. The best way to do this is to talk with those who have held the job before. Landon Butler, deputy chief of staff in the Carter administration, agreed: "I think, by and large, we learned far more from our predecessors than we did from any written material. We learned from our predecessors and they were very helpful. They genuinely wanted us to be successful at running the White House at least."<sup>8</sup>

To supplement such conversations, though not to substitute for them, we present here a summary of the wisdom offered by former chiefs, deputy chiefs, other former administration

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Gerald Ford by Martha Kumar, October 10, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Richard Cheney by Martha Kumar, July 27, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> White House Interview Program, Interview with Thomas McLarty, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, DC, November 16, 1999. <https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/research/transition-interviews/pdf/mclarty.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Landon Butler by Martha Kumar, October 14, 1999.

officials, and members of Congress in extensive interviews, as well as scholarly observations. Table 1 provides a listing of all chiefs of staff beginning with the Nixon administration. Since 1969, 26 individuals have served in that office for an average tenure of two years—an indication of the stress and burnout caused by the position.

**Table 1. White House Chiefs of Staff, Nixon-Trump**

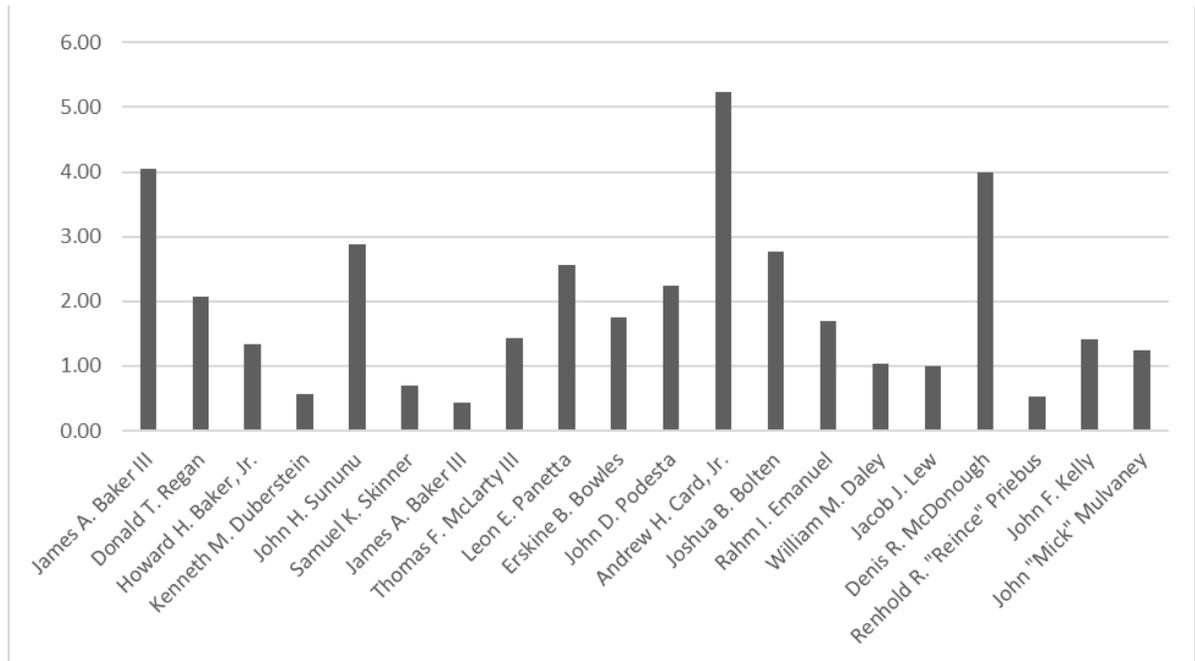
Chief of Staff	Tenure	President
Harry Robbins (H.R.) Haldeman	1969-73	Nixon
Alexander M. Haig, Jr.	1973-74	Nixon
Donald H. Rumsfeld	1974-75	Ford
Richard M. Cheney	1975-77	Ford
William Hamilton M. Jordan	1979-80	Carter
Jack H. Watson, Jr.	1980-81	Carter
James A. Baker III	1981-85	Reagan
Donald T. Regan	1985-87	Reagan
Howard H. Baker, Jr.	1987-88	Reagan
Kenneth M. Duberstein	1988-89	Reagan
John H. Sununu	1989-91	G.H.W. Bush
Samuel K. Skinner	1991-92	G.H.W. Bush
James A. Baker III	1992-93	G.H.W. Bush
Thomas F. McLarty III	1993-94	Clinton
Leon E. Panetta	1994-97	Clinton
Erskine B. Bowles	1997-98	Clinton
John D. Podesta	1998-01	Clinton
Andrew H. Card, Jr.	2001-06	G.W. Bush
Joshua B. Bolten	2006-09	G.W. Bush
Rahm I. Emanuel <sup>9</sup>	2009-10	Obama
William M. Daley	2011-12	Obama
Jacob J. Lew	2012-13	Obama
Denis R. McDonough	2013-17	Obama
Reinhold R. “Reince” Priebus	2017	Trump
John F. Kelly	2017-19	Trump
John “Mick” Mulvaney <sup>10</sup>	2019-20	Trump
Mark R. Meadows	2020-p	Trump

*Source:* Compiled by the Authors.

Figure 1 shows the tenure in years of every White House chief of staff since the Reagan administration—the point at which appointing a chief of staff became institutionalized. During the modern era, Andrew Card had the longest tenure at 5.23 years and Reince Priebus had the shortest (of any chief not serving at the tail end of a presidency) at just over six months.

<sup>9</sup> After Emanuel left his post to run for mayor of Chicago, Senior Adviser Peter M. Rouse served as interim chief of staff from October 1, 2010, to January 13, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Had title “Acting Chief of Staff”

**Figure 1. Tenure in Years**

## MANAGERIAL ROLES

### SELECTING AND MANAGING WHITE HOUSE PERSONNEL

In most administrations the entire White House staff, with few exceptions, will report to the president through the Office of the Chief of Staff. Best practices demonstrates that at the outset of an administration, the chief of staff should be, and often has been, primarily responsible for putting together the staff. Having one's own people is essential. Loyalty, energy, dependability, temperament, and work style are important attributes for working in the White House. At the same time, a chief must ensure that no matter what personal agendas aides may have (and most aides do have them), it is the *president's* agenda they pursue.<sup>11</sup> More generally, James Baker advised would-be chiefs of staff that:

The people who succeed in Washington are the people who are not afraid to surround themselves with really good, strong people. If you're afraid to surround yourself with really top-notch, quality people—because you're afraid they'll overshadow you or what not, and there is a lot of that that goes on—you're not going to succeed. A strong White House staff buys the president one hell of a lot.<sup>12</sup>

Typical of a chief given responsibility for selecting his team was John Sununu in the Bush 41 administration. A White House observer recalled:

When the White House staff was put together, there was very little interaction with the other part of the transition. In other words, it was basically Sununu did his own thing...anybody that was appointed by the president, that would be an assistant to the president, deputy assistant to the president, special assistant to the president, the President was involved. But to his credit, he gave

<sup>11</sup> White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999. <https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/research/transition-interviews/pdf/moore.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

a very long leash to John Sununu—"If that's the team you want, that's okay. Or, "Are you sure you really want to do it? If you really want to do it it's okay." But the benefit of the doubt went with John Sununu in putting together the White House staff.<sup>13</sup>

However, Sununu did not have complete control over selecting his team as evidenced by the fact that Andrew Card was tapped as deputy chief of staff by President-elect Bush himself.<sup>14</sup>

Best practices demonstrate that in order to exercise effective control over White House operations and prior to the beginning of an administration, the chief of staff-designate should oversee the White House transition, and in fact, should be the first administration official hired by the President-elect. This appointment process need be separate from the rest of the transition to government and the chief must be able to pick at least their principal deputies.

Two criteria deemed essential in the initial choice of top staff aides are political savvy and Washington experience. James Baker noted: "It [political credentials] gives you far more cachet in policy debates and inter-departmental policy....If you've been out there fighting the political wars with the president, you're in a better position to speak to those issues than other people who just maybe gave some money."<sup>15</sup>

W. Henson Moore, deputy COS for George H.W. Bush and a former Member of Congress, remarked that both the chief of staff and the deputies "...really ought to have some political experience. This is no place to have on the job training in politics...they've got to have some political instincts."<sup>16</sup>

Marlin Fitzwater, press secretary for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, likewise noted the difference between the management challenges of the White House and those elsewhere, and the importance of both Washington experience and personal relationships:

When you talk about management of the White House from the chief of staff, you're really talking about twenty people, a very small group. And that turns out to be a very personal kind of thing. Then there's a second circle of management in which you're kind of directing cabinet officers and deciding agenda issues and matters like that that grow out of it. But in terms of the people management it's a very small group and it's always a personality kind of thing. And that's also why I think businessmen have such a difficult time. There's always this kind of feeling when you bring in businessmen or businesswomen with experience and they'll bring some professionalism to the organization. And they always fail because they always think in line-staff structural relationships and in business they don't have to worry about personal relationships because they have the power. They give orders; they take away your salary; they can fire you; they can give you bonuses. And in the White House all those normal management techniques go out the window. Oftentimes you can't fire people.<sup>17</sup>

Chiefs of staff that come from the world of Wall Street sometimes find this all too true. The struggles of chiefs of staff Donald Reagan and William Daley highlight this.

Implicit in the advice that the chief pick the top staff, is the importance of loyalty to the chief of staff themselves. Samuel Skinner, who replaced John Sununu as COS under Bush 41, noted that

there's a tendency, if loyalists [to the president] get into the White House and they...don't have a duty and responsibility to the chief of staff as having put them there, the chief of staff can have

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13 Background interview.

14 Interview with Andrew H. Card, Jr. by David B. Cohen, October 25, 2007.

15 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

16 White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999, *op cit*.

17 Interview with Marlin Fitzwater by Martha Kumar, October 21, 1999.

them go around him very easily unless you have a president who never lets that happen. Even though you control the process, there are ways to get around it.<sup>18</sup>

The same kind of problem can appear when a president wants to replace people, but is reluctant to simply let them go. This invites friction and discontent. As Howard H. Baker, Jr., COS during the Reagan administration put it, “If you cut the dog’s tail off, cut it all off at once.”<sup>19</sup>

Leon Panetta encountered this when he attempted to replace press secretary Dee Dee Myers, a longtime Clinton aide, with Mike McCurry at the beginning of his tenure as chief of staff. Myers made a last-minute personal plea to the President to save her job and he relented. Myers got a title promotion and remained for another few months, eventually being replaced by McCurry.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the Myers episode aside, Panetta managed to bring in a core of key people upon whom he could depend.

More commonly, the problem connected to long-term White House service is burnout. A chief of staff taking over in mid-term may find, as Alexander Haig did during the Watergate affair and Skinner did after Sununu, key personnel simply have burned out under the relentless pressure of White House work.<sup>21</sup>

Naturally a chief of staff who comes in the middle of an administration usually does not have the luxury of completely cleaning house, but must be able to have some flexibility in getting the shop in order and his people placed. This was the problem that beset Skinner when he took over for Sununu. Skinner’s deputy, Henson Moore, observed:

We did not have hire-and-fire authority. The President had his staff; he had been goaded, pushed, convinced into getting rid of Sununu and Card, people both of whom he liked, and he wasn’t going to hear of anybody else being replaced on that staff. So, once that word gets out to the people who are supposed to be reporting to you, and taking orders from you, that you can’t touch them, you have limited authority to really make things happen.<sup>22</sup>

Skinner concurred, noting that “the President also made it quite clear that he did not want a wholesale change in his staff.”<sup>23</sup> But, said Skinner,

A good friend of mine, Vernon Jordan, told me... you’ve got to have your own people in order to make anything work in Washington. I think those people have to be accountable. The only other way you’re going to do that is to fire one of the President’s favorites and let it be known that you’ve got to fire him. That’s hard to do.<sup>24</sup>

Both Howard and James Baker likewise insisted on bringing in a solid group of their own people when they took over the Office of the Chief of Staff during the Reagan and Bush administrations. As Howard Baker’s deputy, John Tuck recalled:

He picked his own team...except for Marlin (Fitzwater) who stayed, who was there before. Everybody else changed over and it was just understood that when Senator Baker became the chief of staff that it was going to be a Baker team... [This permitted] a strong chief of staff system

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18 Interview with Samuel Skinner by Martha Kumar, April 24, 2000.

19 Interview with Howard Baker in Interview with Howard H. Baker, Jr. & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

20 Carl M. Cannon, “Panetta’s Move to Oust Press Secretary Thwarted,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 24, 1994.

[http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-09-24/news/1994267004\\_1\\_dee-myers-white-house-panetta](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-09-24/news/1994267004_1_dee-myers-white-house-panetta) (accessed October 29, 2016).

21 Interview with Jerry Jones by Martha Kumar, April 11, 2000; Interview with Samuel Skinner by Martha Kumar, April 24, 2000.

22 White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999, *op cit*.

23 Interview with Samuel Skinner by Martha Kumar, April 24, 2000.

24 Interview with Samuel Skinner by Martha Kumar, April 24, 2000.

where the decisions and the decision making process and the people and the access to the president of papers and people was controlled by one person.<sup>25</sup>

In April 2006, Josh Bolten faced similar challenges of entrenched staffers when he succeeded Andrew Card who had served almost five and a half years, longer than any chief since Sherman Adams. One of Bolten's first moves was to revamp the Office of the Chief of Staff and remove Karl Rove from his deputy chief for policy responsibilities, though Rove kept his senior adviser title and deputy chief of staff title. Although initiating a high profile restructuring involving a powerful Washington figure such as Rove can be difficult, Bolten felt such a move was necessary because Rove had too many responsibilities and not enough time to effectively manage them.<sup>26</sup> There also was a concern that because of Rove's stature and celebrity, even inside the West Wing, other staffers were intimidated and would often keep silent during policy debates in his presence.<sup>27</sup>

James Baker noted that you don't have to fire people to move them out. When he brought his team to the White House in 1992, he chose to "layer" the existing staff, moving the new people to the key jobs. "They probably resented that, and probably rightly so. They weren't fired, but they were layered."<sup>28</sup>

Keeping people too long, however, can be a problem, especially if personalities clash or working styles conflict with one another. Gerald Ford's chiefs of staff faced such a situation in dealing with long-time Ford aide and speechwriter Robert Hartmann, whose dismissal from the White House was out of the question. The solution to this internal problem was to circumvent Hartmann whenever possible. James Baker likewise advised that "one good way to discipline people when you're in a political environment like that in the government is to cut them out of meetings."<sup>29</sup> While sometimes effective in the short run, this approach can allow a persistent source of conflict to remain rooted in the White House. It also opens the door to end runs by people who are out of the loop but who still have access to the president.<sup>30</sup>

## ***STRUCTURING THE STAFF***

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### *The White House Office*

Past practices show that a chief of staff can think of structuring in three different senses. The first is structuring the White House Office as a whole. Since most White House staffers report to the president through the COS, the chief should work with the president to set up an overall reporting and decision making system for the WHO. As many White House veterans have noted, this is best done as soon as possible after the election, so the White House staff will be ready to function immediately after the inauguration, if not sooner.

The experience of recent presidencies indicates that there has been relatively little variation in the overall design of the White House in terms of offices and responsibilities. The basic model for the modern White House dates back to the Nixon administration and has been modified only at the margins since then. Thus, it is likely that the major political offices such as Congressional Relations, Public Liaison, Communications and Press, will appear in some form in any new administration, as will the key staff organizations, such as the Office of Management and Administration and the Staff Secretariat. Likewise, the basic model for the National Security Council and its staff, as well as the domestic policy staff, has become stable. The Clinton White

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25 Interview with John Tuck in Interview with Howard Baker & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

26 Interview with Joshua B. Bolten by David B. Cohen, October 19, 2007.

27 Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

28 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Interview with Marlin Fitzwater by Martha Kumar, October 21, 1999.

House's creation of the National Economic Council in 1993 to deal specifically with economic policy has further institutionalized the operation of a White House-based economic group that has functioned in some form since the Ford administration. The Bush 43 White House kept and utilized the NEC as one of its four policy councils which included the NSC and Domestic Policy Council. The fourth policy council, the Homeland Security Council headed by a homeland security adviser, was created originally by executive order (13228) in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and later made permanent by statute (Homeland Security Act of 2002) thus ensuring that the HSC would be a permanent part of the White House landscape. The NSC also has an air of permanence having been created similarly by an act of Congress (National Security Act of 1947).<sup>31</sup>

Within this overall framework, however, there have been important differences in operating patterns. Most generally, one can distinguish between relatively “strong” and “weak” chiefs of staff. This is an oversimplification, but it does point to a contrast in organizational strategies. The primary differences are in the degree to which the chief of staff controls information flow to the president and the extent of the chief of staff's control over the president's schedule. The contrast between Sununu and Skinner in the Bush 41 administration, and between McLarty and Panetta in Clinton's, illustrates the strong and weak models of chief of staff. From these examples it is also clear that the relative “strength” of a chief of staff is not just a matter of the chief of staff's preference, but is also dependent upon circumstances—the chief of staff is bound by the president's habits and operating style. More recently, the experiences of all of Donald Trump's chiefs, particularly Reince Priebus and Mick Mulvaney, demonstrate that a president's personality and work habits eclipse most every other variable.<sup>32</sup> Andrew Card cautioned that “the bureaucracy of the White House should reflect the needs and personality of the occupant of the Oval Office....The organizational chart should reflect the needs the president has rather than the bureaucracy that he's inherited.”<sup>33</sup> The job of the chief of staff is to make the best of that, and to compensate where possible for whatever weaknesses emerge.

A further dimension of chief of staff “strength” involves the scope of their control of information and access. While all chiefs have sought to oversee the flow of paper and people in the areas of domestic policy and politics, chiefs have varied in their relationship with the national security adviser and the NSC staff in general. The national security adviser is one of the principal potential White House competitors of the chief of staff. Some chiefs, such as Leon Panetta, have insisted that the national security adviser go through them, while others have not. Panetta described the system he set up:

So I developed that chain of command and then I also wanted to make sure that the key people—press secretary, the national security director, the head of the Economic Council, OMB, counsel to the President, some of those key positions—reported directly to me, because these are what I would call upper-tier staff. So they reported to me, and then under the deputies everyone had somebody they had to report to.<sup>34</sup>

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31 Karen M. Hult, Charles E. Walcott, and David B. Cohen, “Not Always According to Plan: Theory and Practice in the Bush White House,” in Robert Maranto, Tom Lansford, and Jeremy Johnson, Eds., *Judging Bush* (Stanford University Press: 2009); Bradley H. Patterson, Jr. *To Serve the President: Continuity and Innovation in the White House Staff* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2008).

32 David B. Cohen and Karen M. Hult, “The Office of the Chief of Staff in the Trump White House, 2017-2019,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50 (June 2020): 392-417.

33 Bradley H. Patterson, Jr. *To Serve the President: Continuity and Innovation in the White House Staff* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2008), p.40.

34 Interview with Leon Panetta by the Miller Center at the University of Virginia, January 31, 2003, p.72. <http://millercenter.org/oralhistory/interview/leon-panetta> (accessed October 15, 2016).

This is not always the choice of the COS alone. Nonetheless, it can be a fateful choice. In the first four years of the Reagan administration, for instance, the national security adviser did not report through Chief of Staff James Baker, but through Counselor Edwin Meese. Moreover, once William Clark became national security adviser in 1982, his long-time relationship with President Reagan rendered him outside staff control.<sup>35</sup> In hindsight, Baker indicated that he would want his own person in the job of national security adviser from the start. Similarly, some chiefs have taken a hands-on approach to the Office of Management and Administration—again, Panetta is an example—while others have not.<sup>36</sup>

On the whole, the “standard” model tends to be the one lauded by most of those who have served as chief of staff or deputy chief of staff as well as observers of the White House.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Skinner, McLarty, Priebus, and Mulvaney are the only recent chiefs of staff since Hamilton Jordan under Carter who did not clearly attempt this approach. But the chiefs caution that “strength” must be exercised within the understanding that the chief of staff is not the president, and that the chief of staff serves only the president’s agenda.

### *Organization of the Office of the Chief of Staff*

The second structural responsibility of the chief of staff is to design the Office of the Chief of Staff. As Howard Baker observed about the need for chiefs to have their own subordinates: “a chief of staff and a national security adviser...are now so loaded with responsibility and with paper...that they sort of get in the same category as the president does. If they don’t have somebody prompting them or watching out for them, they’ll get in the same fix.”<sup>38</sup> There has not been a great deal of variation in the organizational schemes for the chief of staff’s office, but there have been different approaches to dividing responsibility.

Most chief of staff offices have been relatively lean, with one or two deputies reporting directly to the chief with one deputy assigned to handle political and policy issues while the other oversees White House operations. During the Reagan years (Figure 2 and Figure 3), no more than one individual served with the official title of deputy chief of staff. At the outset, the Reagan White House utilized a troika system with James Baker as COS, Edwin Meese as Counselor, and Michael Deaver as deputy COS. Deaver, because of his long personal history with the Reagans, had a myriad of responsibilities which included, not only the communications and public relations side of the White House, but also the personal care of and attention to the President and First Lady—responsibilities usually far beyond the scope of a typical deputy chief. Support services (which included the military office), advance, scheduling, and the first lady’s staff all reported through him. Deaver recounted his deputy COS role: “I really gained whatever control or power I had simply by my relationship....I overlapped a lot of Baker. Baker basically gave me free [reign]. I spent most of my time on schedule and travel and the military office and all of the East Wing....When [David] Gergen left, I officially took over the communications role.”<sup>39</sup>

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35 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

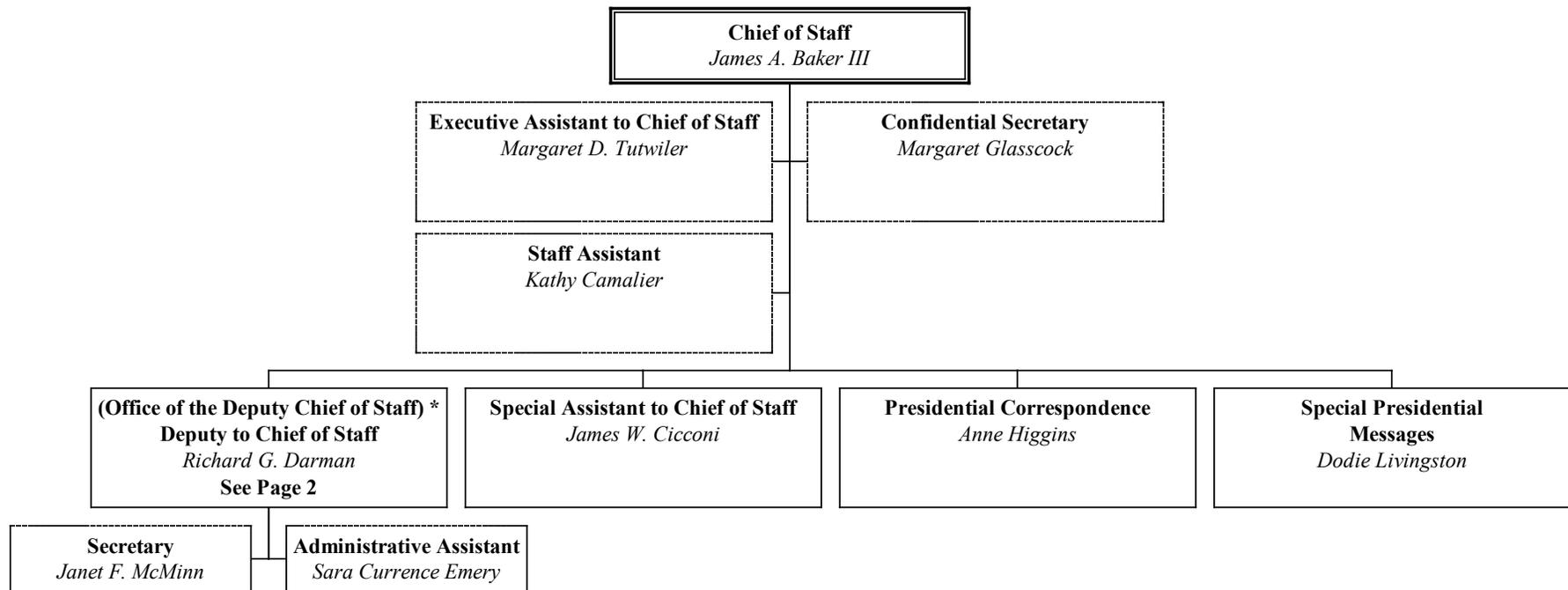
36 Interview with Jodie Torkelson, by Martha Kumar, October 19, 1999.

37 Charles E. Walcott and Karen M. Hult, “White House Structure and Decision Making: Elaborating the Standard Model,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 35 (June 2005): pp.303-18.

38 Interview with Howard Baker in Interview with Howard Baker & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

39 Interview with Michael Deaver by Martha Kumar, September 9, 1999.

Figure 2. President Ronald Reagan, 1981<sup>40</sup>



<sup>40</sup> All organization charts found at <https://whitehousetransitionproject.org/transition-resources-2/office-briefs/#page-part>

White House Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, 1981

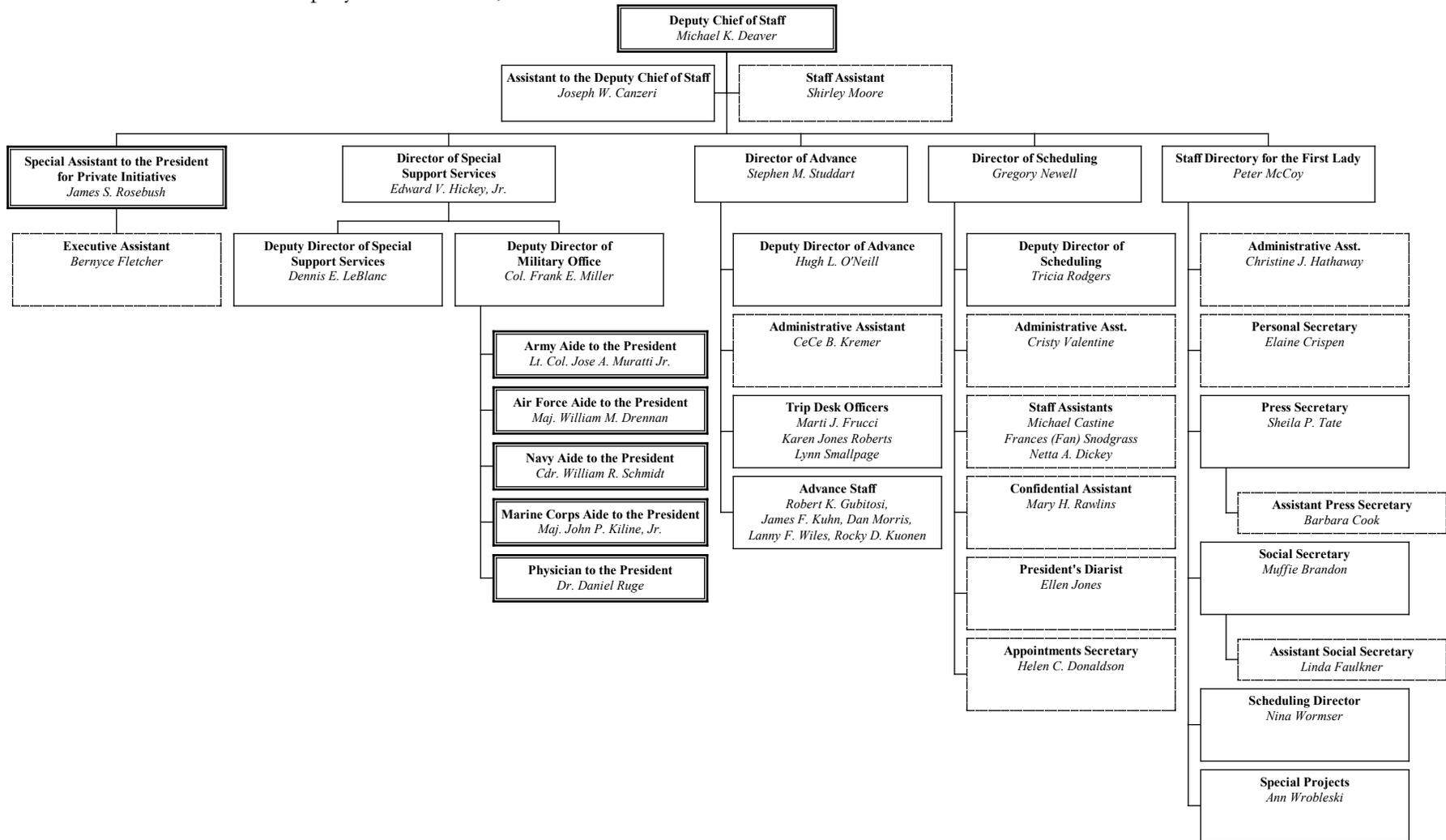
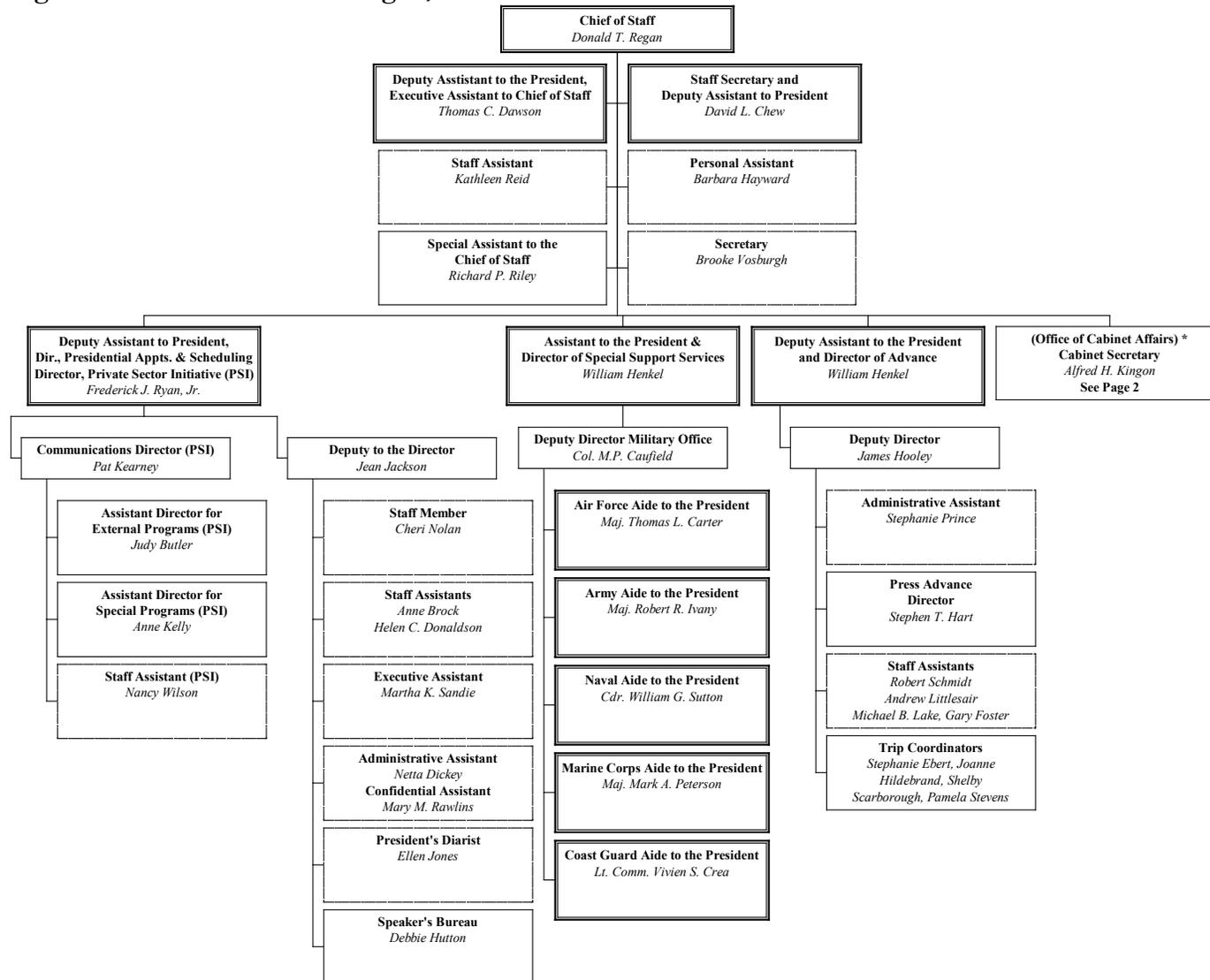


Figure 3. President Ronald Reagan, 1986



Office of Cabinet Affairs

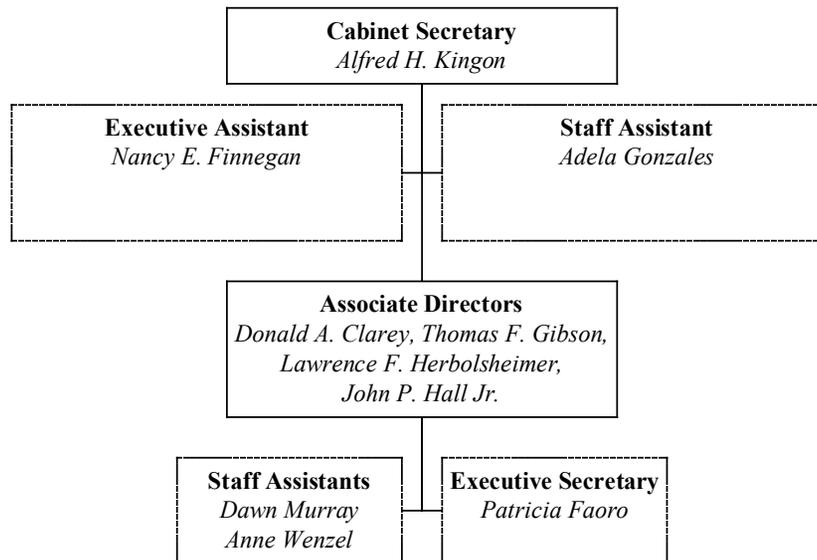
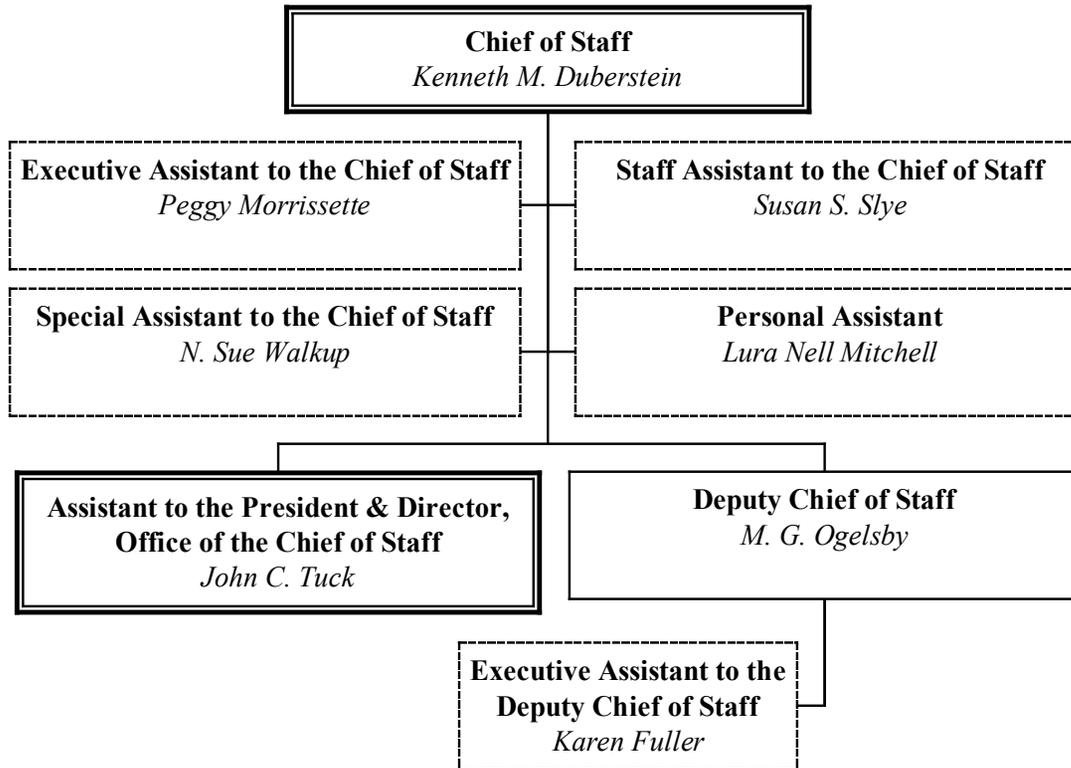


Figure 4. President Ronald Reagan, 1988



After Deaver left the White House in May 1985, he was replaced by Dennis Thomas who was de facto deputy COS, but only given the formal title of “Assistant to the President.”<sup>41</sup> Regan also relied heavily on a group of subordinates, who had outsized influence compared with their White House rank; indeed, other Administration officials derisively nicknamed them “The Mice.”<sup>42</sup>

Following Regan’s departure in February 1987, COS Howard Baker tapped Ken Duberstein to be his deputy, complete with the official title. Due to Baker’s frequent absences from Washington to care for an ill wife and mother, Duberstein filled in for his boss more frequently than the average deputy COS.<sup>43</sup> When Duberstein was elevated to COS in 1988, he in turn promoted his longtime aide, M.B. Oglesby Jr., to the deputy COS position (Figure 4).

Beginning with the George H.W. Bush administration, multiple deputy chiefs of staff become more common. Bush selected Andrew Card and James Cicconi, both veterans of the Reagan White House, to be deputies to Chief of Staff John Sununu in 1989; the two also received commissions as “Assistants to the President.”<sup>44</sup> Although his official title was “Deputy to the Chief of Staff,” (Figure 5) Card was a de facto deputy chief of staff in every sense. Except for one public event in February 1989, President Bush acknowledged or referred to Card publicly as “Deputy Chief of Staff.”<sup>45</sup> Cicconi simultaneously served as staff secretary, thus controlling the paper flow and insuring that it would go through the chief of staff’s office. James Baker used this model in the first Reagan term; his deputy, Richard Darman had simultaneously the title of “Deputy to the Chief of Staff” and served as staff secretary.

The Clinton White House initially had one deputy chief of staff, Mark Gearan, who was replaced by Roy Neel in May 1993, who in turn was replaced by Philip Lader in December of that year. On January 3, 1994, Harold Ickes joined Lader as deputy chief of staff. From this point forward, every White House has had at least two deputy chiefs. Leon Panetta (Figure 6) was the first chief of staff to give his deputies titles that reflected their primary duties and responsibilities. On September 23, 1994, as part of a major White House reorganization, Panetta announced that he was assigning the title of “Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Political Affairs” to Ickes and that Erskine Bowles would replace Lader and be appointed as “Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations.”<sup>46</sup>

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41 According to the Reagan Library: “In July 1985 William Dennis Thomas began work as the chief assistant to Donald Regan, the White House Chief of Staff. He served as a de facto deputy chief of staff, though this title was never used of him. Thomas advised and assisted Regan on the full range of policy and administrative matters, with a concentration on economic policy. Thomas also oversaw White House staff involvement in President Reagan’s overseas trips, and coordinated the drafting of Reagan’s State of the Union messages. He attended many Administration meetings with Mr. Regan, accompanied Regan on some of President Reagan’s travels, screened appointment requests and telephone calls for Regan, and occasionally substituted for Regan at meetings and events.” <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/textual/smf/thomasw2.htm> [accessed December 18, 2013].

42 “The Mice” were Thomas C. Dawson, Executive Assistant to the Chief of Staff and Deputy Assistant to the President; David L. Chew, Staff Secretary and Deputy Assistant to the President; Al Kingdon, Cabinet Secretary and Deputy Assistant to the President; and W. Dennis Thomas, Assistant to the President. Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), pp.501-3.

43 See Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, edited by Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

44 See George H.W. Bush Library, “Appendix A: Digest of Other White House Announcements,” January 21, 1989, [http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public\\_papers.php?id=1380](http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=1380) (accessed December 3, 2013).

45 E.g., see George Bush: “Remarks to the American Legislative Exchange Council,” April 28, 1989. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16978> (accessed December 3, 2013).

46 William J. Clinton: “Press Briefing by Chief of Staff Leon Panetta,” September 23, 1994. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=59786> (accessed December 18, 2013).

Figure 5. President George H.W. Bush, 1990

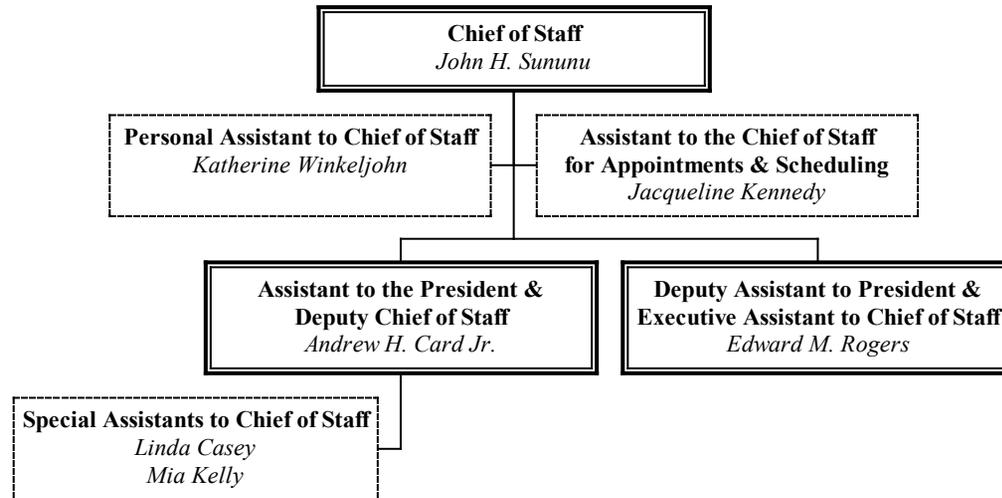
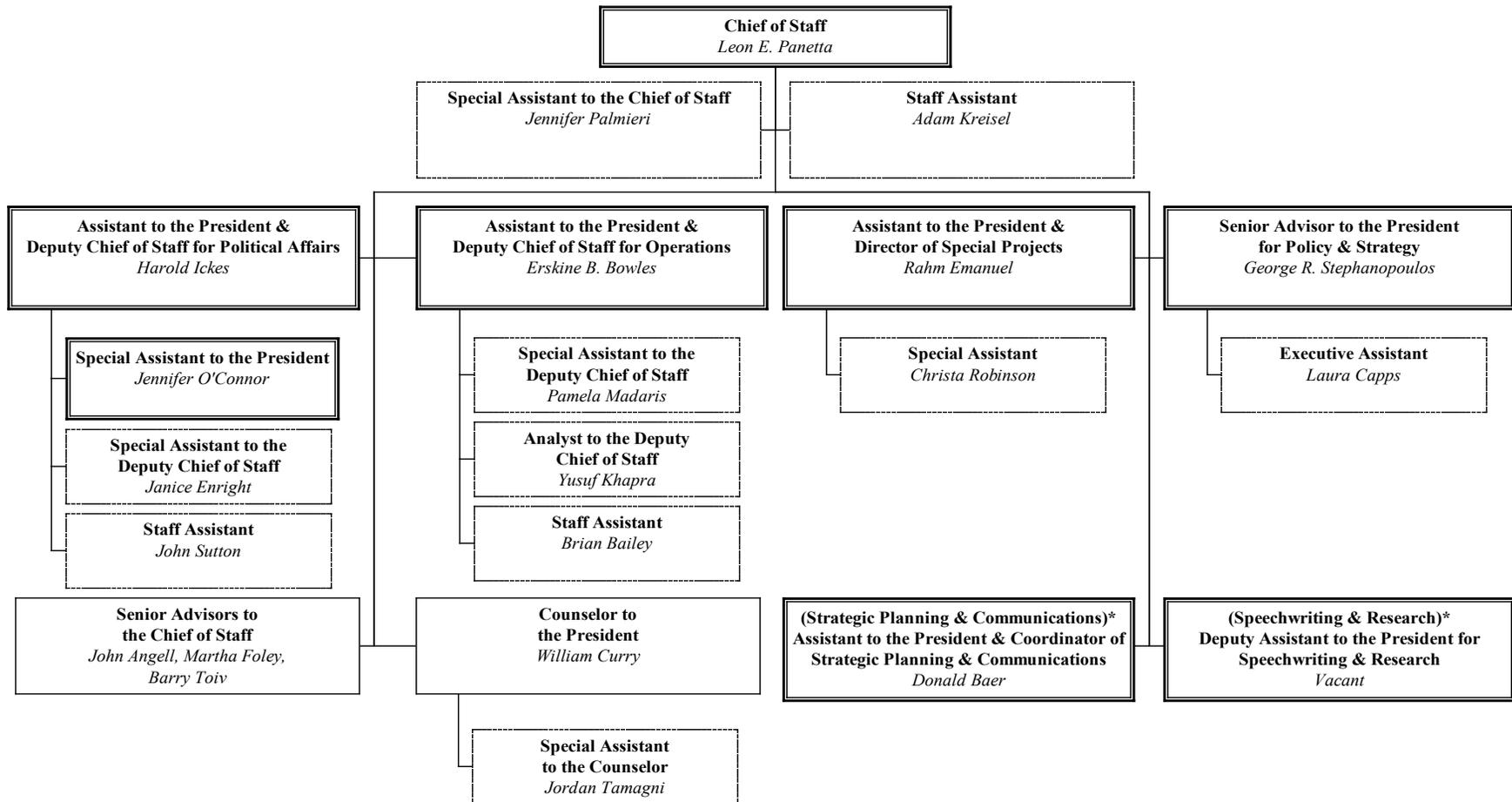
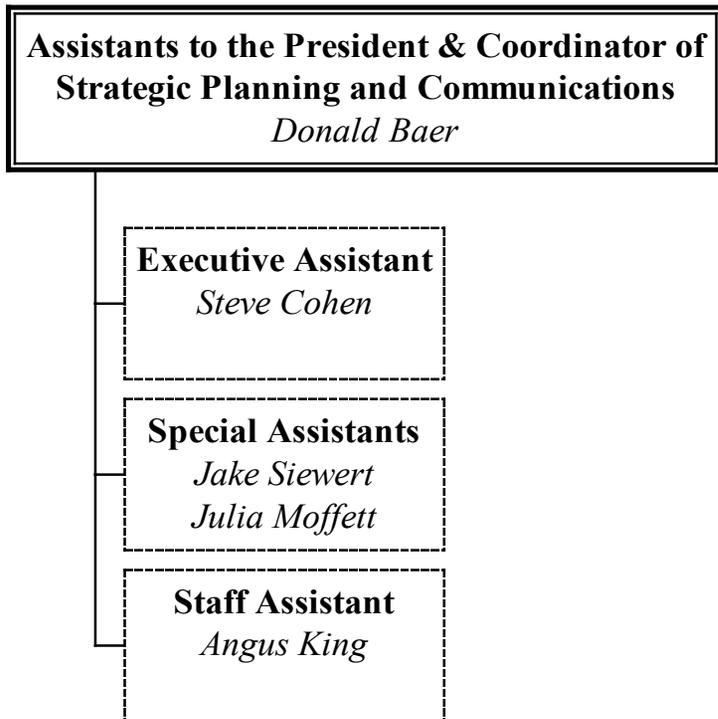


Figure 6. President William J. Clinton, 1995



Strategic Planning and Communications



Speechwriting and Research

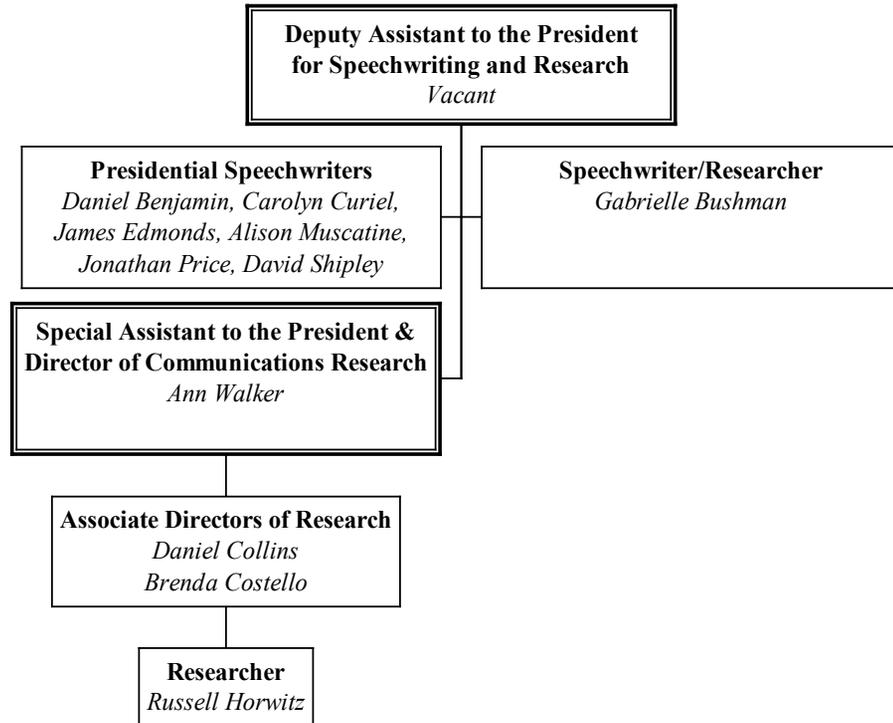
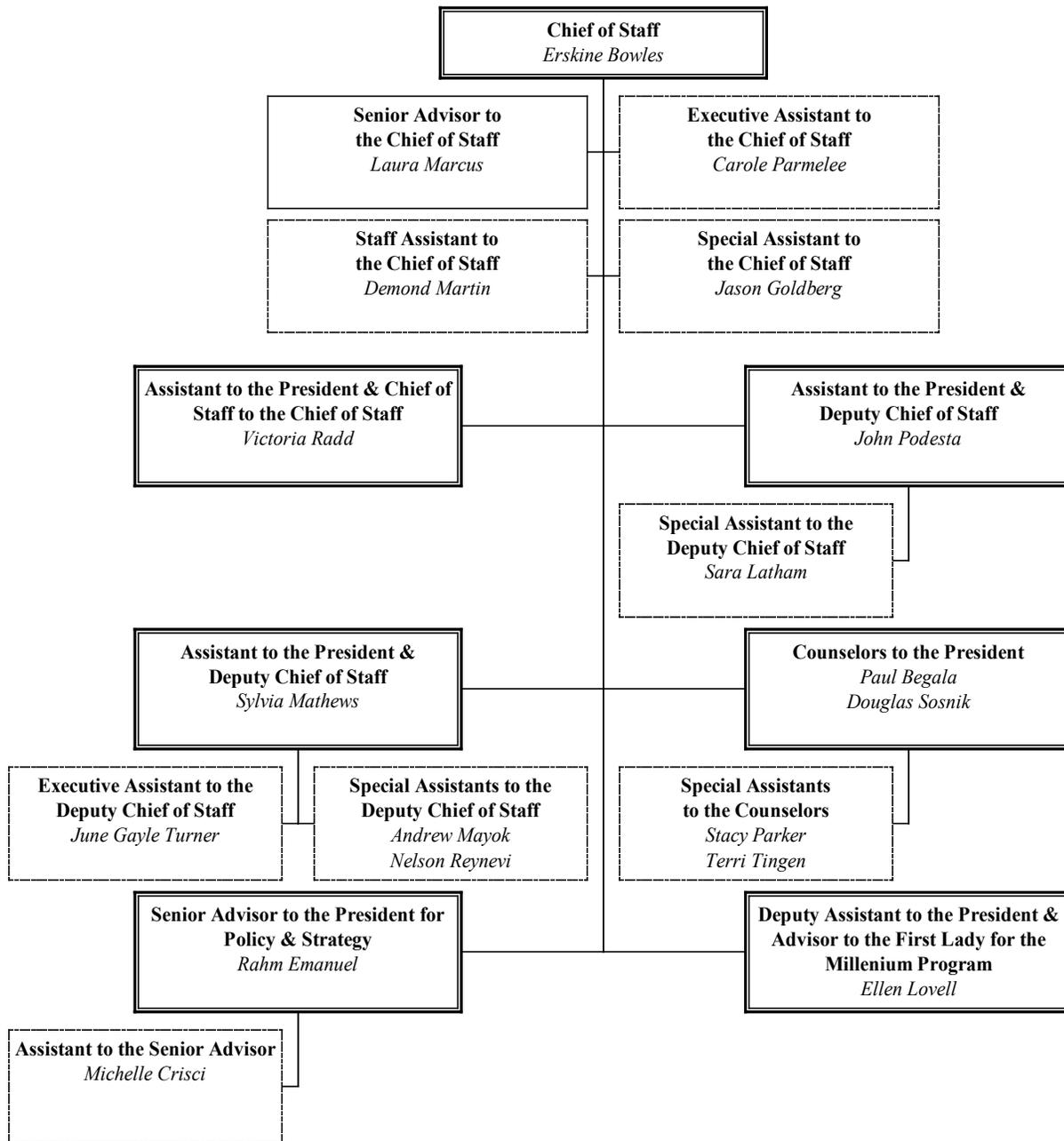


Figure 7. President William J. Clinton, 1998



Panetta's successors, Erskine Bowles (Figure 7) and John Podesta, maintained two deputies responsible for those areas, but their official titles reverted to the more general designation of "Deputy Chief of Staff."

The George W. Bush White House continued the practice of having two deputy chiefs of staff (Figure 8), with one responsible for policy and the other operations. As was the case in the second Clinton term, however, official titles of deputy chiefs of staff bearing the "operations" or "policy" moniker did not reappear until Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten appointed Joel Kaplan "Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy" in April 2006. Kaplan's counterpart for operations, Joe Hagin, and Hagin's successor, Blake Gottesman, were titled only "Deputy Chief of Staff."

When Bolten hired Kaplan (Figure 9), Deputy Chiefs of Staff Karl Rove and Joe Hagin were retained, and for the first time a White House had three deputy chiefs. Part of this was likely due to optics—replacing a political celebrity and Bush loyalist such as Rove, who had most of his policy portfolio taken away when Kaplan was hired, would have produced countless controversial stories in the media. Instead, Rove was given responsibility for "planning" with a charge to focus on bigger policy and political issues.<sup>47</sup> When he left in August 2007, it was with little fanfare, and he was not replaced as deputy COS.

Rahm Emanuel, a veteran staff member of the Clinton White House and President Obama's first chief of staff (Figure 10), reverted to the Panetta practice of including an official descriptor in the deputy chief of staff titles. He appointed Jim Messina "Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations" and Mona Sutphen "Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy." Every subsequent deputy COS has had an official descriptor in their title.

In 2012, Mark Childress was named "Deputy Chief of Staff for Planning," giving the Obama White House three deputy chiefs. Like Karl Rove who assumed a similar position in 2006, Childress focused on big picture items such as marketing the Administration's signature first-term accomplishment, the Affordable Care Act.<sup>48</sup> In May 2014, Childress was replaced by Kristie Canegallo, who took over his duties on the ACA as well as the general policy portfolio.<sup>49</sup> Canegallo's official title, deputy chief of staff for policy implementation, was yet another iteration of the deputy chief of staff for policy title. Canegallo was de facto deputy chief of staff for policy in general as then-deputy COS for policy, Rob Nabors, had been sent to the Department of Veterans Affairs to deal with the burgeoning problems with the VA. The Obama White House continued to have three deputy chiefs on the books until May 2015 when Nabors (Figure 11), who never returned to his White House post, became chief of staff of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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47 On April 19, 2006, Press Secretary Scott McClellan announced a change in Rove's duties from policy to a broader strategic role: "Karl will continue to be Deputy Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor to the President. What this will do is it will allow him to focus more on the larger strategic planning, and Joel will focus on the day-to-day management of the policy process. And so this really frees Karl up to focus on bigger strategic issues. He will continue to be a crucial voice and trusted advisor on policy...as he has been since the beginning of this administration." George W. Bush: "Press Gaggle by Scott McClellan," April 19, 2006. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=64310> (accessed November 26, 2013).

48 Evan McMorris-Santoro, "Meet the Most Powerful Man in the White House You've Never Heard Of," BuzzFeed, May 30, 2013. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/evanmcsan/meet-the-most-powerful-man-in-the-white-house-youve-never-he> (accessed December 18, 2013).

Jennifer Epstein, "Obama Puts ACA Adviser in Key Role," Politico, May 14, 2014. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/evanmcsan/meet-the-most-powerful-man-in-the-white-house-youve-never-he> (accessed October 29, 2016).

Figure 8. President George W. Bush, Fall 2002

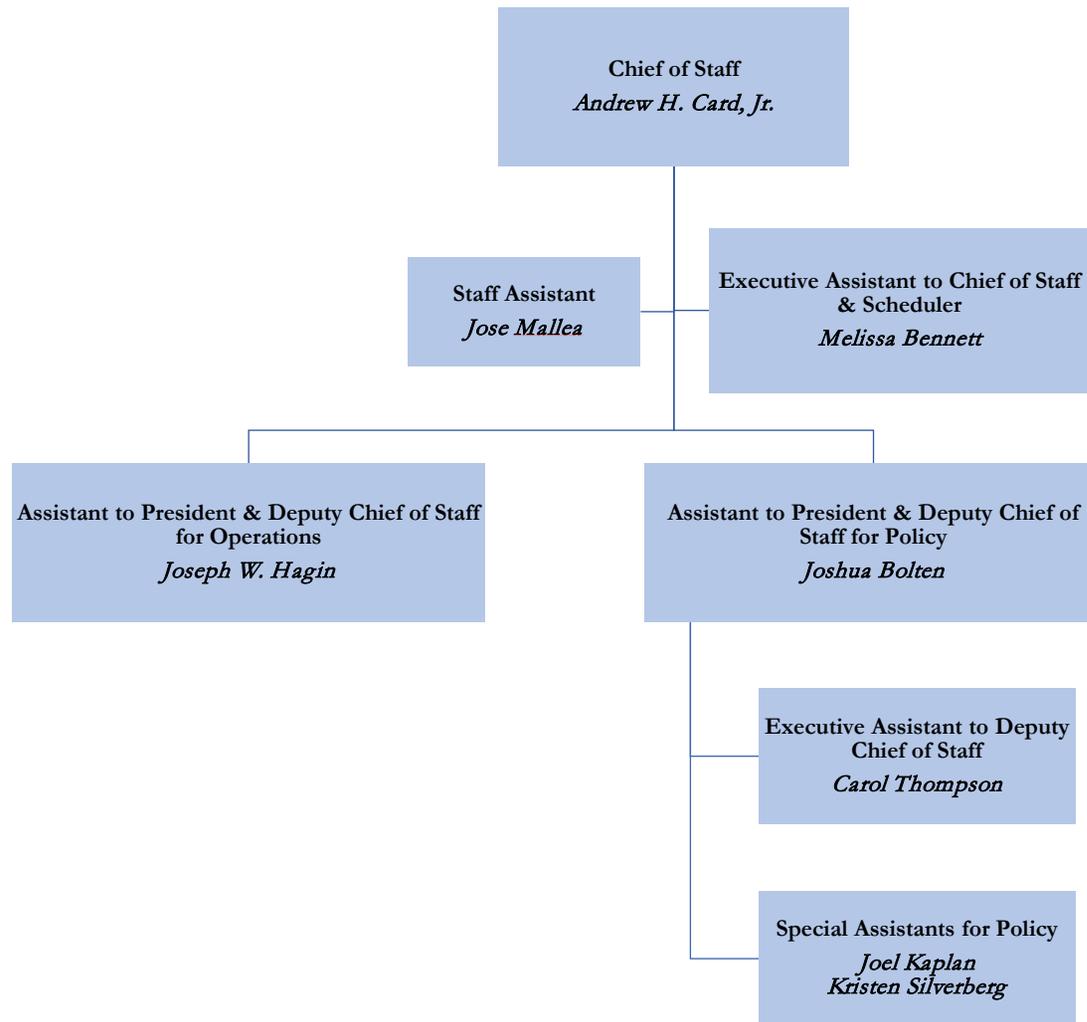


Figure 9. President George W. Bush, 2006

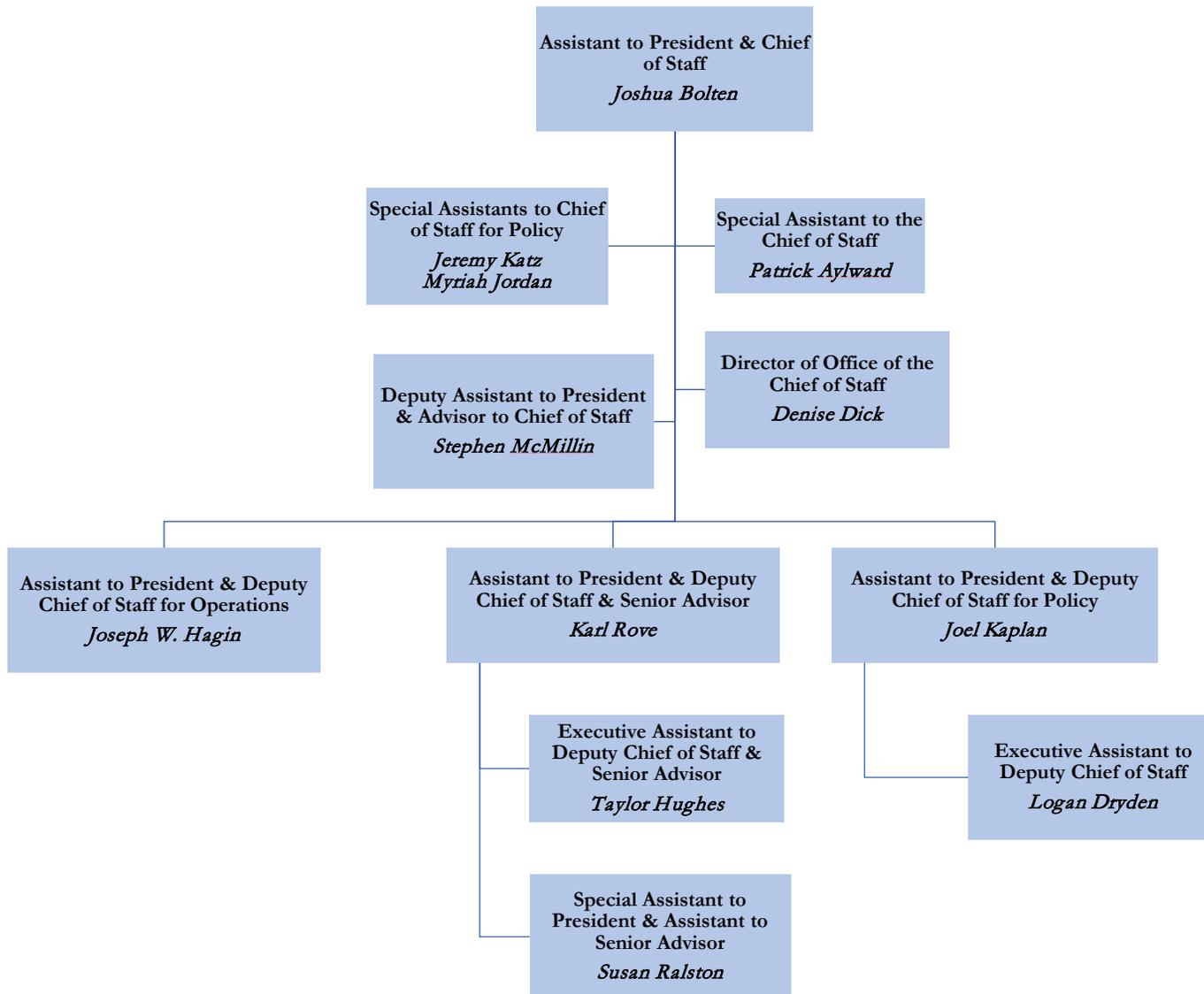


Figure 10. President Barrack H. Obama, 2010

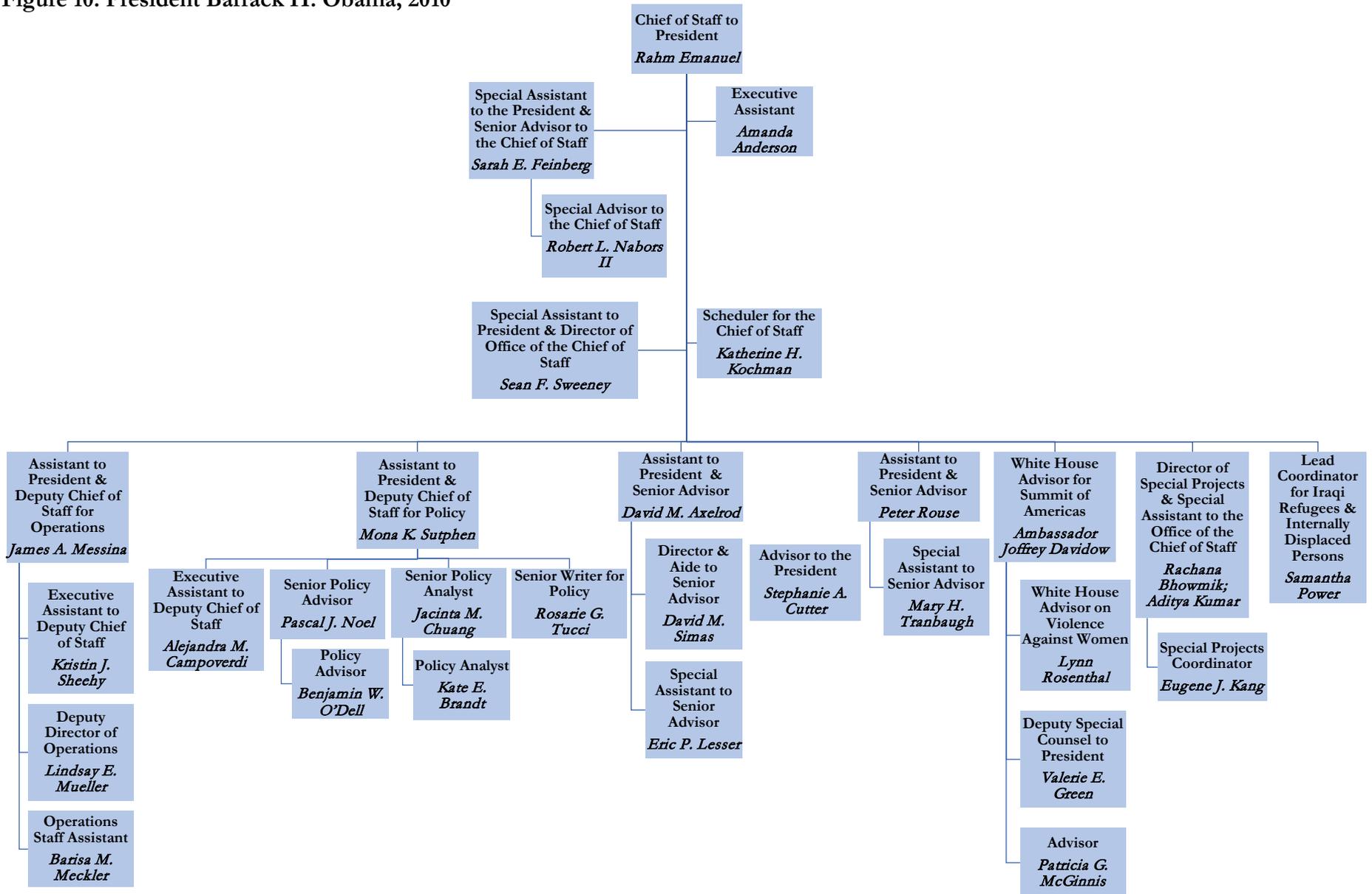
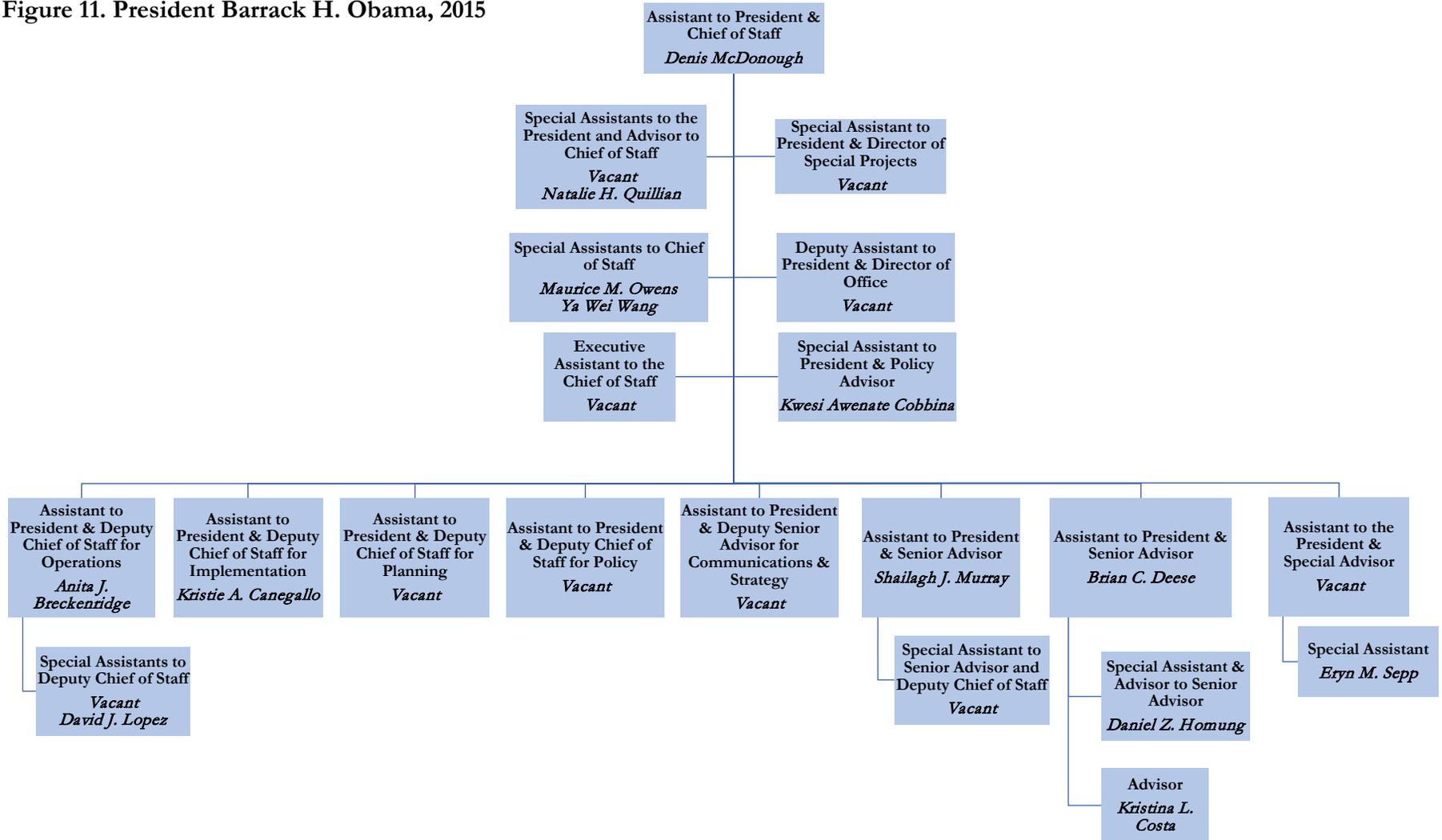


Figure 11. President Barrack H. Obama, 2015



Although the deputies in the Obama White House have had formal titles indicating their emphases were “policy” or “operations,” some of the occupants recall that the distinction rarely signaled meaningful differences in their activities. For example, in the early Obama administration, as part of his portfolio, deputy chief for operations, Jim Messina, supervised “the operational and political shops, overseeing the White House’s interactions with the Secret Service, the scheduling office, the advance teams and the public liaison.”<sup>50</sup> Given his experience in both the House and Senate, Messina also oversaw the congressional liaison unit. Mona Sutphen, a foreign policy expert who had worked as a special assistant to the national security assistant in the Clinton administration, was deputy chief of staff for policy. Her primary responsibility was to oversee and coordinate the various policy councils and the inter-agency process in the White House.<sup>51</sup>

The Trump White House largely turned back to the office model used during the Bush 43 White House utilizing a hard delineation of duties split between deputy chiefs of staff, with one of those deputies tasked for operations. The Trump COS Office has also employed a minimum of three deputies, institutionalizing a practice first initiated in 2006. When John Kelly was named chief of staff in the summer of 2017, he hired Kirstjen Nielsen as “principal deputy chief of staff.” This was the first time the title had been used and it clearly indicated Nielsen’s “first among equals” status. When Mick Mulvaney succeeded Kelly in January 2019, Emma Doyle was hired as principal deputy chief of staff.<sup>52</sup>

The overall lesson is that the duties of the deputies vary with those of the president and the chiefs whom they serve. For example, in administrations in which the chief of staff frequently functioned as a presidential emissary to Congress, deputies might take on those responsibilities as M.B. Oglesby did for Ken Duberstein at the end of the Reagan administration and Jim Messina did under Rahm Emanuel. Other chiefs preferred or prioritized performing some tasks over others and charged one or more aides to take on other activities. Henson Moore reports, for instance, that Samuel Skinner disliked traveling, so Moore travelled with President George H.W. Bush.<sup>53</sup> Later in the administration, as the 1992 election approached, COS James Baker mostly eschewed internal White House brokering and coordinating tasks, devoting his energies to the reelection campaign.

Table 2 contains a listing of all deputy chiefs of staff who have served since 1981, as well as COS and deputy COS dates of service..

In addition to the chief of staff and deputy chiefs of staff, there have usually been two or three assistants (variously titled “Advisor,” “Policy Advisor,” “Personal Assistant,” “Special Assistant,” “Executive Assistant,” “Staff Assistant,” “Secretary,” and even “Chief of Staff”) assigned to the Office of the Chief of Staff and at least one person at roughly the Staff Assistant level to work under each deputy. By 1998, the number had grown to five and more than two decades later in 2020 there were six people assigned to the COS Office.

Beyond that, chiefs of staff have varied with regard to the placement of additional people and duties directly within the Office of the Chief of Staff. Donald Regan (Figure 12), for instance, had three subordinates holding the rank of Deputy Assistant to the President (though none held the official deputy chief of staff title), one of whom, Frederick Ryan, supervised the administration’s Private Sector Initiative, and with it a substantial staff.

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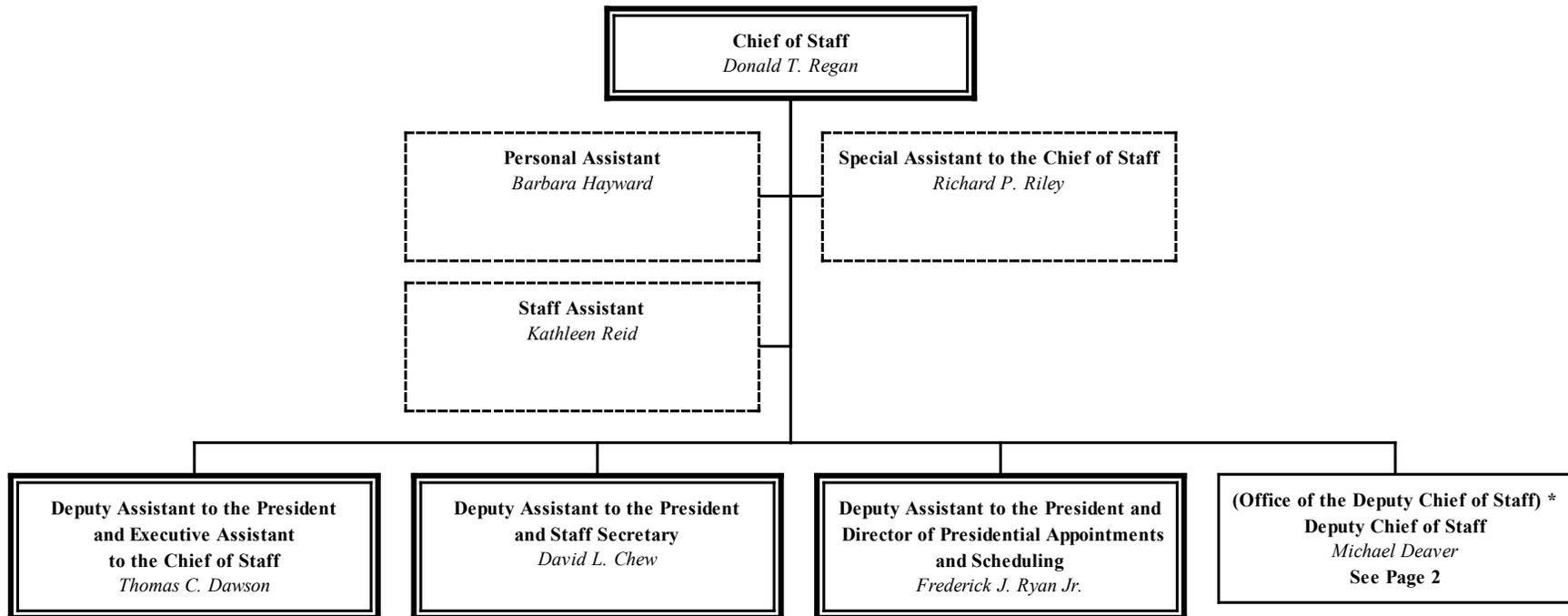
50 Anne E. Kornblut, “For Obama’s Political Knots, He’s the ‘Fixer’; Low-Profile Aide Jim Messina Has Tackled Tough Problems,” *Washington Post*, February 21, 2009.

51 Scott Wilson, “Another World; Policy Chief Enters a New Phase,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 2009.

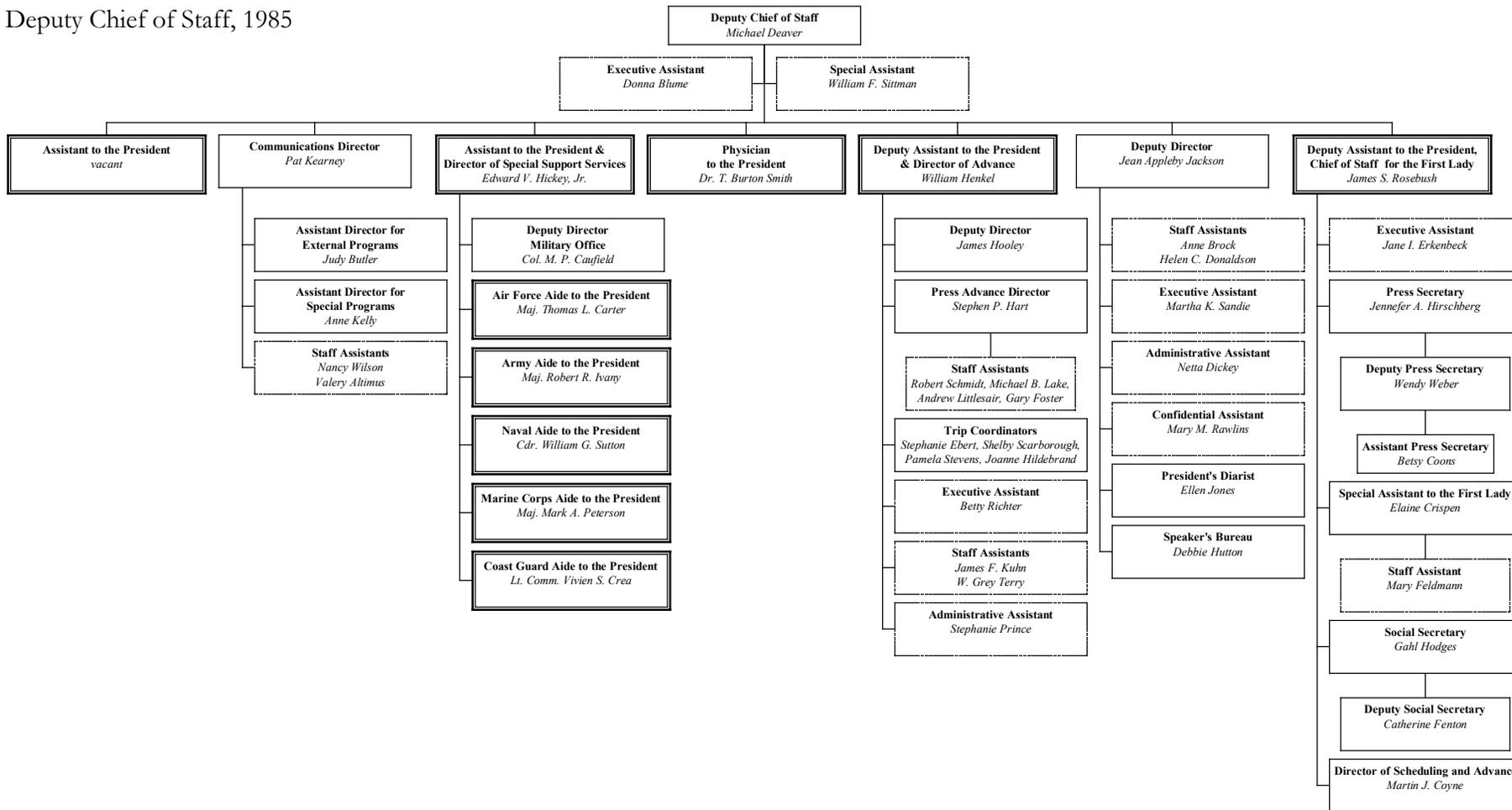
52 David B. Cohen and Karen M. Hult, “The Office of the Chief of Staff in the Trump White House, 2017-2019,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50 (June 2020): 392-417.

53 White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999, *op cit*.

Figure 12. President Ronald W. Reagan, 1985



Deputy Chief of Staff, 1985



**Table 2. Deputy Chiefs of Staff by POTUS and COS, 1/20/1981—1/20/2020**

President	Chief of Staff	Deputy Chiefs of Staff <sup>54</sup>
<b>Ronald W. Reagan</b>	James A. Baker III [01/20/81-02/02/85]	Michael K. Deaver [01/20/81-05/10/85]
	Donald T. Regan [02/02/85-02/27/87]	Michael K. Deaver [01/20/81-05/10/85]
	Howard H. Baker, Jr. [02/27/87-07/01/88]	W. Dennis Thomas [07/15/85-05/87] <sup>55</sup>
	Kenneth M. Duberstein [07/01/88-01/20/89]	Kenneth M. Duberstein [03/23/87-07/01/88] M.B. Oglesby, Jr. [07/05/88-01/20/89]
<b>George H.W. Bush</b>	John H. Sununu [01/20/89-12/16/91]	Andrew H. Card, Jr. [01/20/89-02/03/92] <sup>56</sup>
	Samuel K. Skinner [12/16/91-08/23/92]	James W. Cicconi [01/89-01/91] <sup>57</sup>
		Andrew H. Card, Jr. [01/20/89-02/03/92]
	James A. Baker III [08/23/92-01/20/93]	William Henson Moore, III [02/03/92-08/23/92] Robert B. Zoellick [08/23/92-01/20/93]
<b>William J Clinton</b>	Thomas F. McLarty III [01/20/93-07/17/94]	Mark D. Gearan [01/20/93-06/07/93]
		Roy M. Neel [05/93-11/93]
		Philip Lader [12/93-10/03/94]
		Harold M. Ickes [01/03/94-01/20/97]
	Leon E. Panetta [07/17/94-01/20/97]	Harold M. Ickes (Policy and Political Affairs) [01/03/94-01/20/97]
		Philip Lader [12/93-10/03/94]
		Erskine B. Bowles (White House Operations) [10/03/94-01/11/96]
		Evelyn S. Lieberman (White House Operations) [01/11/96-12/96]
	Erskine B. Bowles [01/20/97-10/20/98]	Sylvia M. Mathews [01/97-05/98]
		Maria Echaveste [05/29/98-01/20/01]
John D. Podesta [10/20/98-01/20/01]	John D. Podesta [01/97-10/20/98]	
	Maria Echaveste [05/29/98-01/20/01]	
	Stephen J. Ricchetti [11/98-01/20/01]	

<sup>54</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, staffers had the formal title “deputy chief of staff.”<sup>55</sup> Official title was “Assistant to the President.”<sup>56</sup> Official title was “Deputy to the Chief of Staff.”<sup>57</sup> Official title was “Deputy to the Chief of Staff.”

President	Chief of Staff	Deputy Chiefs of Staff <sup>54</sup>
<b>George W. Bush</b>	Andrew H. Card, Jr. [01/20/01-04/14/06] Joshua B. Bolten [04/14/06-01/20/09]	Joseph W. Hagin II (Operations) [01/20/01-07/20/08] Joshua B. Bolten (Policy) [01/20/01-06/26/03] Harriet E. Miers (Policy) [06/27/03-02/03/05] Karl C. Rove (Policy) [02/03/05-08/31/07] Joseph W. Hagin II (Operations) [01/20/01-07/20/08] Blake L. Gottesman (Operations) [07/20/08-01/20/09] Karl C. Rove (Planning) [02/03/05-08/31/07] Joel D. Kaplan (Policy) [04/19/06-01/20/09]
<b>Barack H. Obama</b>	Rahm I. Emanuel [01/20/09-10/1/10] William M. Daley [01/13/11-01/27/12] Jacob J. Lew [01/27/12-01/25/13] Denis R. McDonough [01/25/13-01/20/17]	James A. Messina (Operations) [01/20/09-01/26/11] Mona K. Sutphen (Policy) [01/20/09-01/26/11] Alyssa Mastromonaco (Operations) [01/27/11-present] Nancy-Anne DeParle (Policy) [01/27/11-01/25/13] Alyssa Mastromonaco (Operations) [01/27/11-present] Nancy-Anne DeParle (Policy) [01/27/11-01/25/13] Alyssa Mastromonaco (Operations) [01/27/11-05/14] Anita J. Decker Breckenridge (Operations) [05/14-01/20/17] Rob Nabors (Policy) [01/25/13-04/02/15] Mark B. Childress (Planning) [01/12-05/22/14] Kristie Canegallo (Implementation) [05/22/14-01/20/17]

President	Chief of Staff	Deputy Chiefs of Staff <sup>54</sup>
<b>Donald J. Trump</b>	Reinhold R. “Reince” Priebus [01/20/17-07/31/17]	Katie Walsh (Implementation) [01/20/17-03/30/17] Joseph W. Hagin II (Operations) [01/20/17-07/06/18]
	John F. Kelly [07/31/17-01/02/19]	Rick A. Dearborn <sup>58</sup> (Policy) [01/20/17-03/16/18] Kirstjen M. Nielsen (Principal Deputy) [09/06/17-12/06/17] James W. Carroll, Jr. [12/06/17-02/09/18] Zachary D. Fuentes (Deputy) [06/06/18-01/02/19]
	John “Mick” Mulvaney [01/02/19-03/31/20]	Joseph W. Hagin II (Operations) [01/20/17-07/06/18] Daniel P. Walsh (Operations) [07/06/18-12/19] Rick A. Dearborn (Policy) [01/20/17-03/16/18] Christopher P. Liddell (Policy Coordination) [03/19/18-present] William “Bill” Shine (Communications) [07/05/18-03/08/19]
	Mark R. Meadows [03/31/20-present]	Emma Doyle (Principal Deputy) [01/03/19-04/21/20] Daniel P. Walsh (Operations) [07/06/18-12/29] Anthony Ornato (Operations) [12/19-present] Christopher P. Liddell (Policy Coordination) [03/19/18-present] William “Bill” Shine (Communications) [07/05/18-03/08/19]
		Emma Doyle (Principal Deputy) [01/03/19-04/21/20] Anthony Ornato (Operations) [12/19-present] Christopher P. Liddell (Policy Coordination) [03/19/18-present] Dan J. Scavino (Communications) [04/21/20-present]

<sup>58</sup> Title listed as Deputy Chief of Staff for Legislative, Cabinet, Intergovernmental Affairs and Implementation in the Annual Report to Congress on White House Personnel, June 30, 2017

Election season has normally brought substantial campaign responsibilities to the chief of staff. This has often been reflected in the addition of people reporting to the chief. Jack Watson's office during Carter's 1980 reelection year (Figure 13), for example, contained several deputies, including a labor liaison and a research director.

Leon Panetta's office likewise expanded, providing an organizational home for counselors and senior advisers such as Rahm Emanuel, and George Stephanopoulos, while insuring that they reported to President Clinton through Panetta. See Figures 15 and 16 to compare the growth in the Office of the Chief of Staff and the staff reporting to the office from Fall 1994 to Fall 1996 (Figure 14 and Figure 15).

When elections are not impending, a relatively lean chief of staff operation is still a viable option. However, the most recent trend is in the other direction (Figure 16). The second four years of the Clinton White House witnessed a continuation of the practice of placing senior advisers in the chief's office. Under John Podesta in 1998, for instance, were two counselors (Paul Begala and Doug Sosnik) and a senior adviser (Emanuel) plus two deputy slots, one assistant deputy, the Deputy Director of Millennium Projects, and eight others who assisted these people. Thus the total personnel at the level of staff assistant or above numbered twenty. That compares with seven under James Baker in 1992.

During the Bush 43, senior counselors were not housed in the COS Office (Figure 17). For example, Karen Hughes and Karl Rove, two of George W. Bush's most influential staffers, were not part of the Office of the Chief of Staff. For the eight years of the Bush 43 presidency, members of the office averaged 10 staffers.<sup>59</sup>

During the Obama administration (Figure 18), senior advisor's such as Pete Rouse and David Axelrod and their direct reports were listed as part of the COS Office. Not surprisingly, this accounted for a significant rise in the number of staff listed as part of the Office of the Chief of Staff at 17.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, in the Trump White House, Senior Counselor Kellyanne Conway's operation is also listed as part of the Office of the Chief of Staff (Figure 19). In 2019, that office had 24 staffers in it.

### *Division of Labor in Recent Administrations*

The division of work among the chief of staff and the deputies varies across and within administrations. There are clearly more demands upon the chief of staff than one individual can satisfy. Delegation is therefore critical. Patterns have varied depending mainly on the interests and experiences of the chief of staff and top staffers. There is no "one best way" to set things up. The interests and backgrounds of the chief of staff and deputy chiefs of staff will have an impact on the kind of operation that is put in place and the division of labor which occurs. The Office of the Chief of Staff is frequently involved in overseeing the policy process, communications strategies, congressional relations, political liaison, and operations of the White House which includes the president's schedule and travel. For instance, former members of Congress such as Howard Baker, Henson Moore, Leon Panetta, Rahm Emanuel, Mick Mulvaney, and Mark Meadows were naturally drawn into this arena.

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<sup>59</sup> Numbers based on White House Transition Project Organization Charts.

<sup>60</sup> Numbers based on White House Transition Project Organization Charts.

Figure 13. President Jimmy Carter, 1980

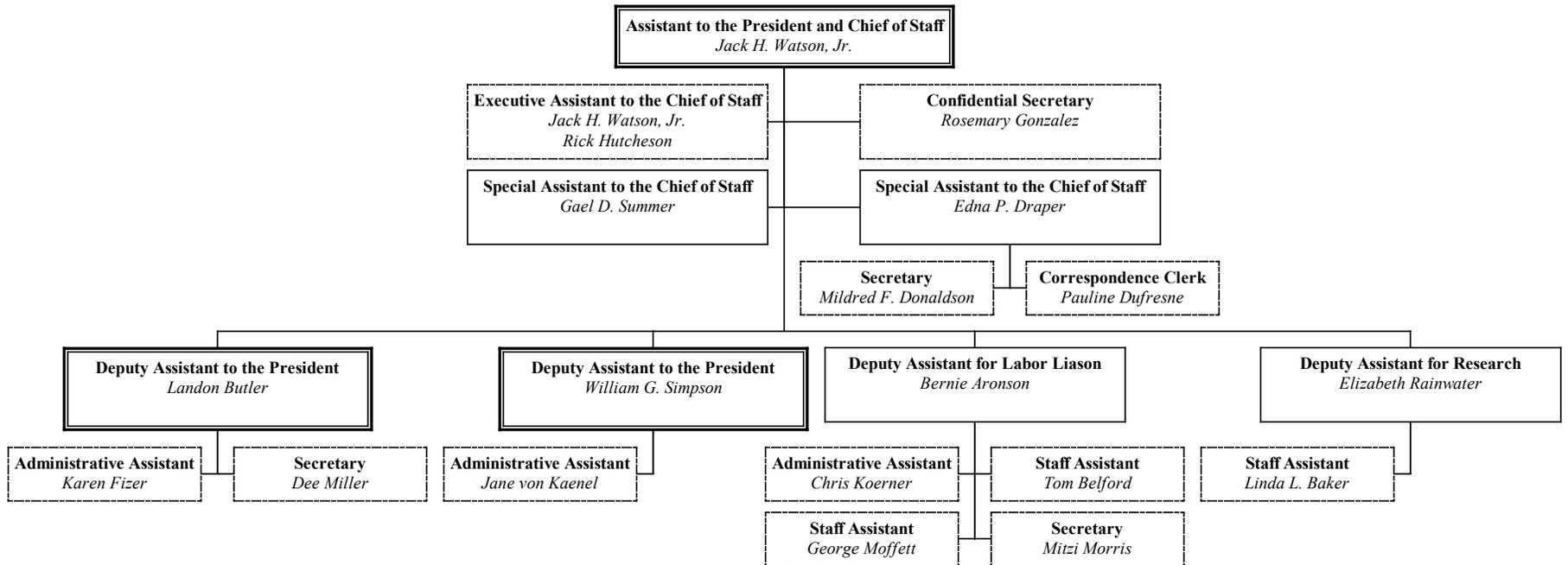


Figure 14. President William J. Clinton, Fall 1994

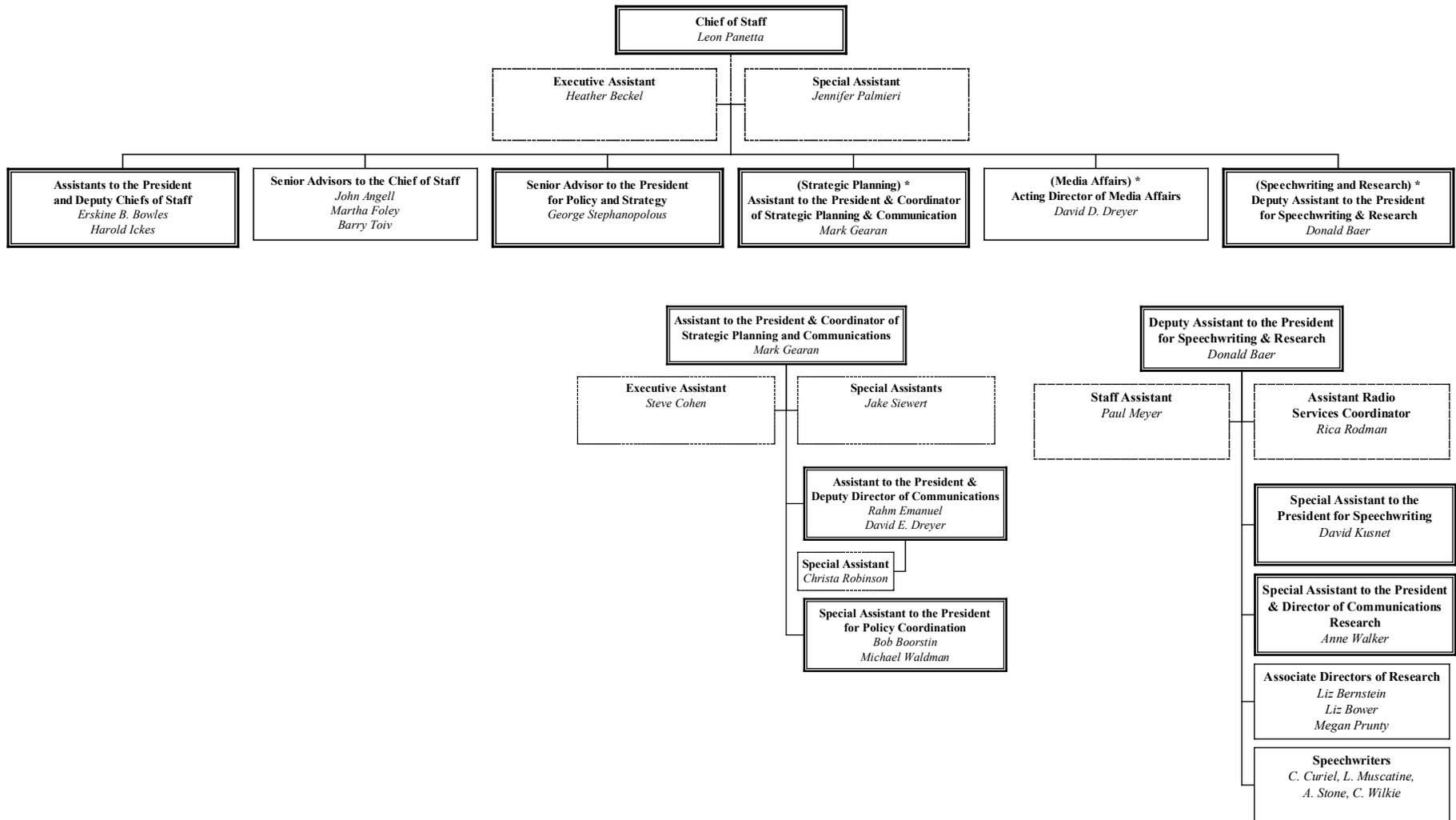


Figure 15. President William J. Clinton, Fall 1996

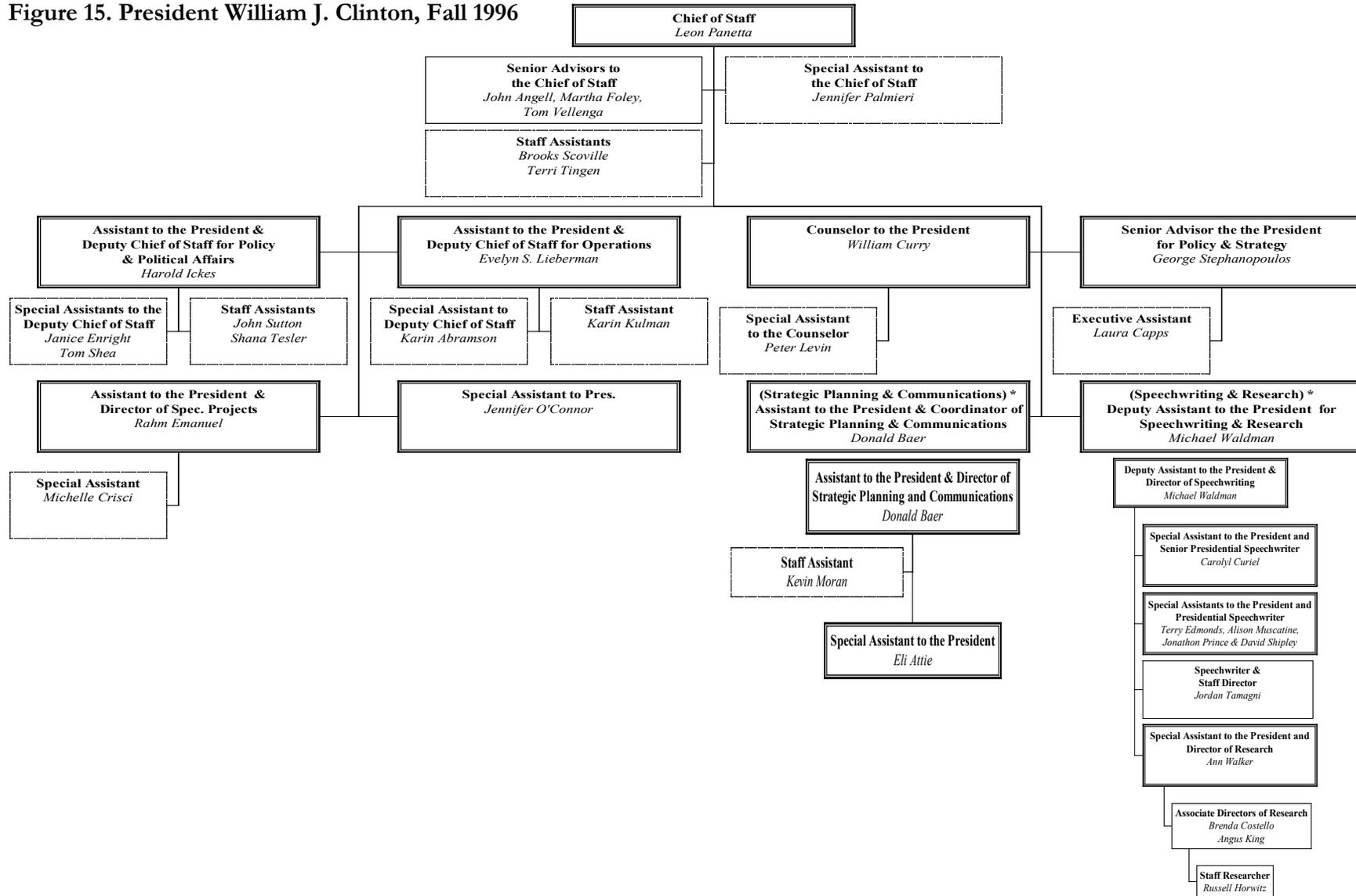


Figure 16. President William J. Clinton, Fall 1998

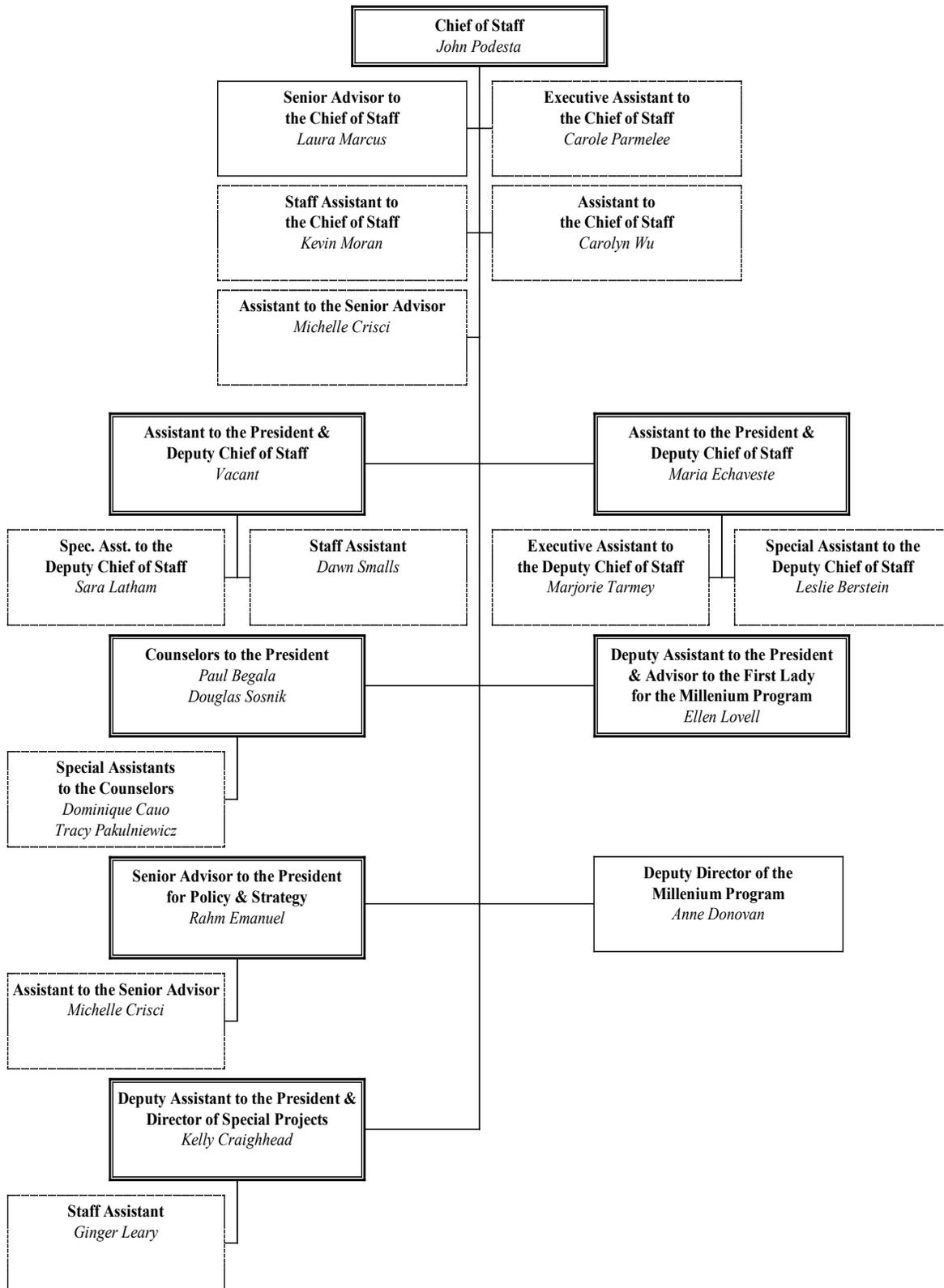


Figure 17. President George. W. Bush, 2003

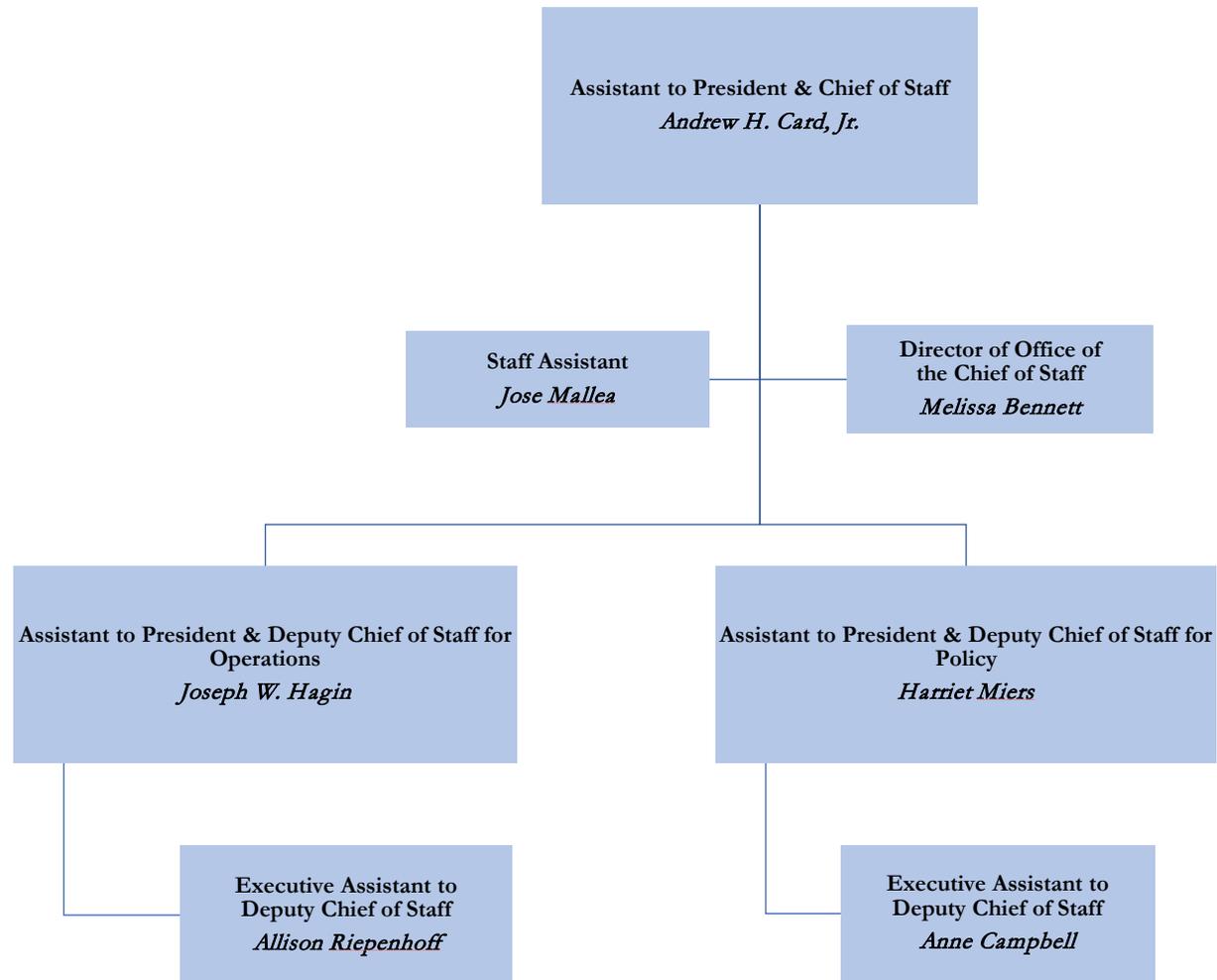


Figure 18. President Barrack H. Obama, 2012

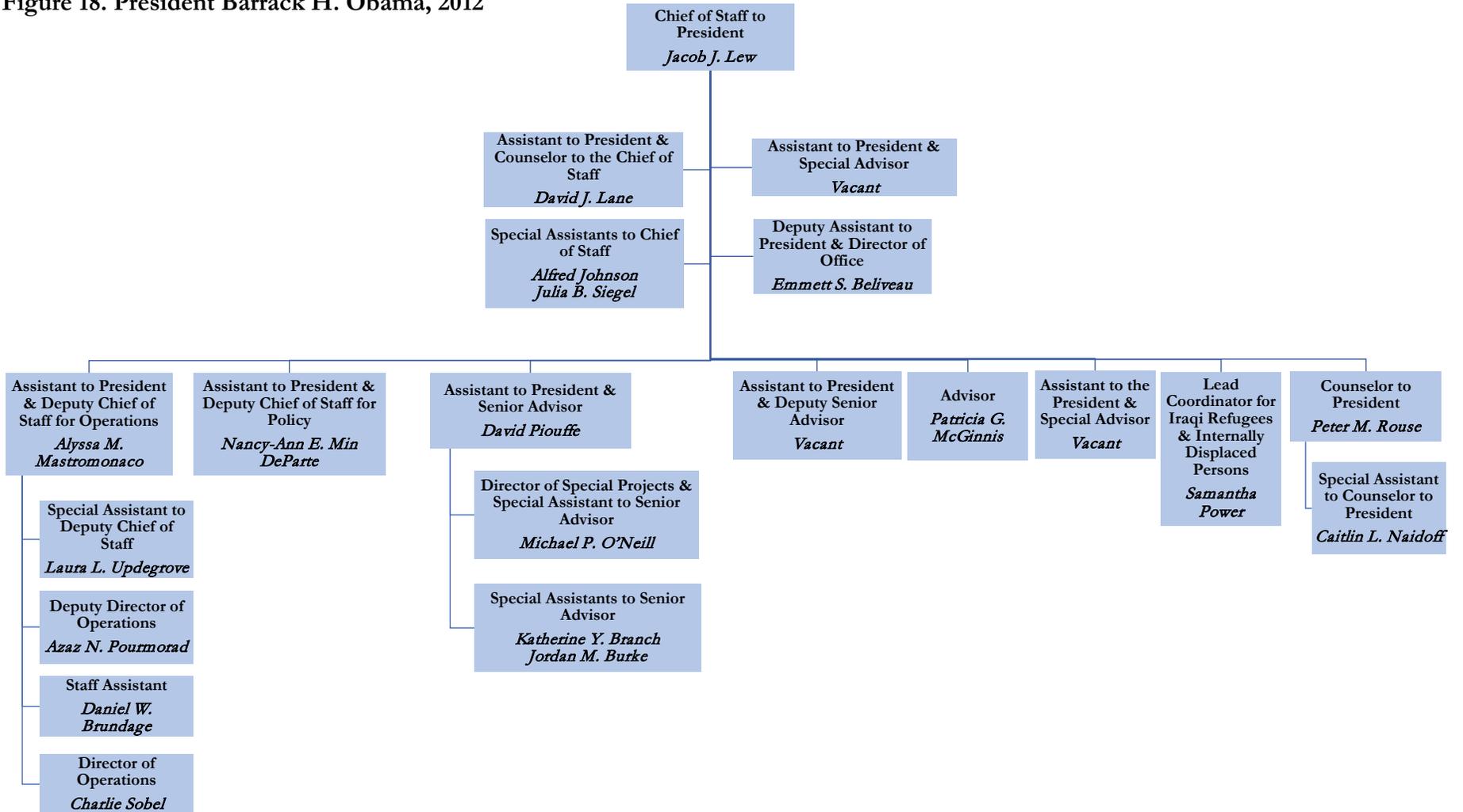
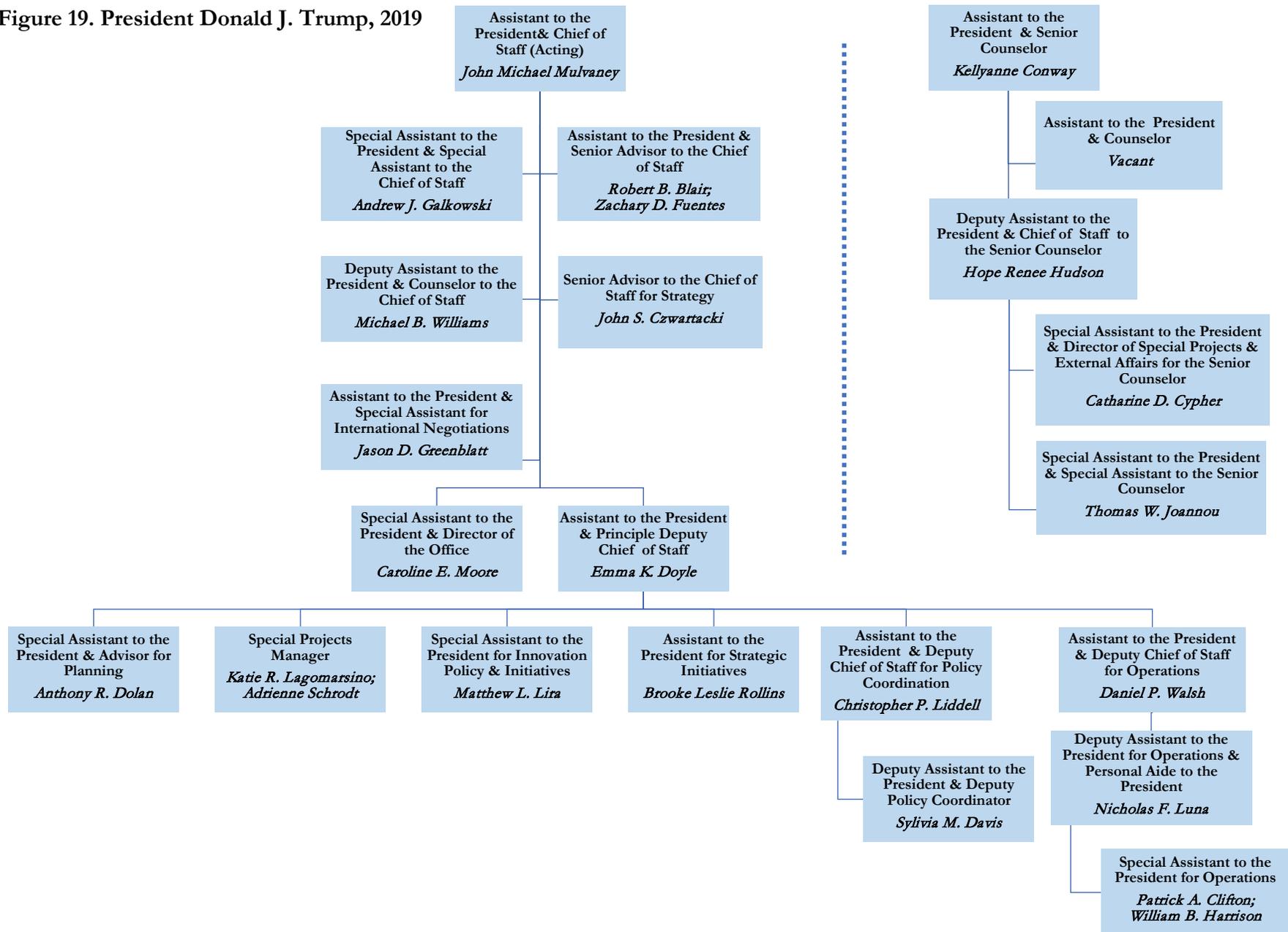


Figure 19. President Donald J. Trump, 2019



James Baker explicitly excluded the Office of the Chief of Staff from policy development at the beginning of the Reagan administration leaving that to Counselor Edwin Meese. Baker assumed responsibility for process.<sup>61</sup> Michael Deaver was responsible for scheduling and travel, the Office of the First Lady and the military, and anything to do with communications. When David Gergen left the White House, Deaver formally assumed responsibility for communications. Another aide, James Cicconi, was primarily responsible for overseeing the decision-making process.<sup>62</sup>

When Donald Reagan succeeded Baker, he put three key aides in place, and allowed the Office of the Chief of Staff to expand considerably. But Howard Baker reverted to a simple model, with two top assistants, one of whom specialized in decision process management.<sup>63</sup> When Baker's deputy, Kenneth Duberstein, became Chief of Staff, the same model was retained.

Little changed under President George H.W. Bush's first chief of staff, John Sununu, who had one deputy, Andrew Card that had the title of deputy to the chief of staff, responsible for overseeing White House operations, and had a varied portfolio beyond that with the usual complement of lower-level aides. Card described a key element of his job: "I was kind of the bad guy in the White House. As deputy chief of staff I did basically all of the salaries. And I was tough. I would say, 'No, we're not going to pay that much.'...I was also very tough on the number of commissioned officers you could have."<sup>64</sup> James Cicconi served with Card as deputy to the chief of staff as well as having a simultaneous appointment as staff secretary thus overseeing the paper flow.

When Samuel Skinner succeeded Sununu as COS, the Office of Chief of Staff had a deputy and a counselor (Henson Moore and Cameron Findlay, respectively). Moore dealt mainly with White House mechanics, with press, scheduling, and speechwriting reporting to him. Moore also became involved in congressional relations, and the job evolved beyond that: "As it turned out, Sam (Skinner) did not like to travel, so I did all the traveling with the President...When you travel with the president you become the chief of staff at that point because the staff is supposed to 'move with the president.'"<sup>65</sup> When James Baker replaced Skinner at the end of the administration he brought in his own people, but kept the basic model. In fact, his deputy, Robert Zoellick, "actually ran the White House at that time," while Baker functioned mainly as chairman of the Bush re-election campaign.<sup>66</sup>

At the outset of the Clinton administration under Mack McLarty, the responsibilities of the deputies were defined rather loosely, as McLarty adjusted to the particular strengths of Mark Gearan then Roy Neel, and to get along without Harold Ickes, whom he had hoped to employ as a deputy COS.<sup>67</sup> The Clinton White House institutionalized the use of two deputy chiefs serving under the chief of staff as Leon Panetta, in the process of strengthening the chief of staff role, expanded the Office of the Chief of Staff. When Panetta succeeded McLarty, he made Ickes, who finally joined the administration at the beginning of 1994, deputy in charge of political affairs and some oversight of substantive issues, while Erskine Bowles took charge of scheduling and management of White House personnel. Panetta also placed senior presidential advisers George Stephanopoulos and Rahm Emanuel in the Office of the Chief of Staff, assuming that they would report to the President through the chief. Moreover, with the 1996 election impending, Panetta

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61 Interview with Michael Deaver by Martha Kumar, September 9, 1999.

62 Interview with James Cicconi by Martha Kumar, November 29, 1999.

63 Interview with Howard Baker & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

64 Interview with Andrew H. Card, Jr. by Martha Kumar, May 25, 1999.

65 White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999, *op cit*.

66 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

67 Interview with Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty by Martha Kumar, November 16, 1999, *op cit*.

placed additional White House staff units—speechwriting and communications—in the now-expanded Office of the Chief of Staff. As chief of staff, himself, following the election, Bowles in part reverted to the earlier pattern, taking on considerable scheduling responsibility himself, while speechwriting and communications were moved out of the office. However, the Office of the Chief of Staff did not shrink back to the simpler model of prior administrations. The senior advisers and others stayed, and the overall staff grew, in part to coordinate the now-expanded office. All administrations have had at least two official deputy chiefs of staff since 1994.

The George W. Bush administration continued to follow the pattern of having one deputy (initially Josh Bolten) for policy and one (Joe Hagin) for operations. While the exact responsibilities of the deputy for policy varied somewhat—they were truncated slightly when Karl Rove held the post—the job of the deputy for operations remained constant.<sup>68</sup> Joe Hagin, the deputy responsible for practically everything except politics and policy, described his job this way:

You could say I'm the chief operating officer...I'm responsible for scheduling, advance, Oval Office operations, the White House Military Office, the liaison with the Secret Service, the Office of Management and Administration, which is on the White House side, and then the Office of Administration which is on the Executive Office of the President side.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond the usual duties of the deputy chief of staff for operations, Hagin was responsible for long-overdue and extensive renovation of several important pieces of the White House complex including the Situation Room, the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room, and the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

The Obama White House consciously removed the strict delineation of roles and responsibilities of the deputies instituted at the beginning of the Bush 43 presidency. Despite holding different titles, the deputies' duties were similar as a particular deputy or other White House principal or principals took the lead on a political, policy, or legislative matter depending upon the particular confluence of issues the White House confronted and the particular background of the principal(s). Thus a more fluid—and at times volatile—process replaced the more static system of the George W. Bush years.<sup>70</sup> Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy Mona Sutphen recalled the way the Office of Chief of Staff differed from the previous two administrations: “their dividing line” between deputy chief of staff roles and responsibilities represented “a much starker division of labor and ours was definitely not that way.”<sup>71</sup> She and Jim Messina, deputy chief of staff for operations, “had a tendency to divide up based on experience a little bit and areas of interest,” but “a lot of it had to do with who was busy with what and if a new issue cropped up on the radar screen...whoever had free hands would deal with it.”<sup>72</sup>

The Office of the Chief of Staff in the Trump White House has had multiple deputy chiefs of staff, with two during much of Reince Priebus's tenure and three under John Kelly, Mick Mulvaney, and Mark Meadows. For a short time under Kelly and Mulvaney, there were an unprecedented four deputy chiefs. Like the Obama administration, Trump's deputy chiefs of staff all have been commissioned as assistants to the president; specific tasks also followed their formal deputy chief of staff titles.<sup>73</sup>

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68 Interview with Joshua B. Bolten by David B. Cohen, October 19, 2007.

69 Interview with Joseph W. Hagin, II by David B. Cohen, October 19, 2007.

70 David B. Cohen, Karen M. Hult, and Charles E. Walcott, “The Chicago Clan: The Chiefs of Staff in the Obama White House,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 93 (December 2012): pp.1101-26.

71 Interview with Mona Sutphen by David B. Cohen, September 20, 2011.

72 Interview with Mona Sutphen by David B. Cohen, September 20, 2011.

73 David B. Cohen and Karen M. Hult, “The Office of the Chief of Staff in the Trump White House, 2017-2019,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50(June 2020): 392-417.

### *Informal Structures*

Not all organizational structuring—recurring, predictable activities and responsibilities—is found on organization charts. Successful chiefs of staff have supplemented formal arrangements by initiating regular group meetings with key White House personnel. This has been a key management tool for all chiefs so long as the senior staff meetings do not get too large and unwieldy.<sup>74</sup>

In addition, different chiefs and/or deputies have taken the lead in initiating meetings to plan communications strategy (e.g., Deaver), brief the Cabinet, plan the president’s schedule (e.g., Moore), or organize task forces or “war rooms” for the pursuit of unusually important projects. The extreme case of informal structuring can be found in the small group Al Haig brought together during the waning days of the Nixon administration to handle the routine business of the White House while the President focused on his fight for political survival.<sup>75</sup> In any case, the desirability or need for such organizational innovations will most likely be dictated by a president’s particular agenda and by circumstances, such as the onset of a campaign season, the development of major legislative efforts (e.g., Carter’s energy plan or Clinton’s health care initiative), national security crises (e.g., the G.W. Bush administration’s response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks), response to a domestic political crisis (e.g., the launch failure of the Affordable Care Act website in 2013), or response to a public health crisis (e.g., the Obama administration’s response to the Ebola epidemic; the Trump administration’s response to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic).

### ***CONTROLLING THE FLOW OF PEOPLE AND PAPER***

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#### *Getting Control of the Paper Flow*

Former chiefs agree that a chief of staff must take responsibility for the operation of the White House. To do so, lines of authority must flow to and through the Office of the Chief of Staff to the president. No matter how White House functions are organized, the information flow must be up and to the COS, usually through the staff secretary, cabinet secretary and deputy chiefs of staff. Only by monitoring the full flow of paper to POTUS can a chief of staff insure that all relevant information has been received and all relevant points of view represented.

The fundamental purpose of orderly processes in the White House is to provide the basis for the best-informed decisions possible. The job of the chief of staff is to assure that all relevant voices are heard in the decision process, and that choices are made with the benefit of full information. James Baker summarized:

You have to make sure you have an orderly system, that you have a system that’s fair. Otherwise, you start the leaking in the press, one against the other. You have to have a system that lets the president hear all sides. And you have to have one, that if you’re going to be running the White House, you have to know what’s going on.<sup>76</sup>

To assure such fairness, all recent White Houses have employed a decision process whereby decision memoranda are routinely circulated, usually by the staff secretary, to all officials with expertise or a stake in a presidential decision. The chief of staff should monitor the workings of this process closely, for it is here, in the framing of the decision and the description of options, that staffers may be tempted to push their own particular interests, or substitute them for those of their principals. Due to the crucial position of the staff secretary in the operation of this system, it is imperative that the chief of staff pick a trustworthy staff secretary. Mark Siegel, who served under Carter, noted that Hamilton Jordan, even before he became chief of staff, was careful to

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Andrew H. Card, Jr. by Martha Kumar, May 25, 1999; Interview with Howard Baker in Interview with Howard Baker & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Jerry Jones by Martha Kumar, April 11, 2000.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

place his own man, Rick Hutchinson, in that position: “Hamilton is a very smart guy, and he understood...that he would control the paper and control the presidency. He would control the paper in the Oval Office, controlled everything.”<sup>77</sup>

The chief of staff, or someone on his staff must supplement the staff secretary in the exercise of judgment as to what gets to POTUS and what does not. Andrew Card, who had this responsibility as deputy chief of staff under George H.W. Bush, contrasted the staff secretary’s monitoring with his own:

They did it watching for policy or consistency of language. I did it to protect the president. Is this something the president has to have today?...The staff secretary job is to be pretty policy wonkish, too. This policy is inconsistent with the one we had the president say last week...That was more of an editorial role; mine was more of how do I protect the president in there from wasting his time and energy.<sup>78</sup>

Leon Panetta made a similar point:

I wanted to funnel all of the issues and decision-making that ultimately had to go to the president through the chief of staff’s operation. That helped a great deal because it came in kind of a vacuum, in which staff people and others weren’t getting decisions on issues, unless they had to take it to the president. And there are a lot of decisions, frankly, that you could make that don’t necessarily have to go to the president. One of the things you have to have in a staff operation [is enable] people [to] make decisions so they keep the place going. So my role was to make decisions. If they were important decisions, I would always brief the President on what was being done, so he knew. But having those decisions made whether it’s scheduling, whether it’s this, whether it’s that, keeps that place running.<sup>79</sup>

Beyond decision memoranda, presidents will also require background papers on issues. President Clinton, for instance, “would want maybe a summary with several pages of backup on a particular matter we were considering.”<sup>80</sup> The Office of the Chief of Staff is often responsible for the preparation of such materials, and likewise for their thoroughness and balance. At the very least, the chief of staff must monitor what goes to POTUS. If the president’s outbox contains material that never went through the inbox—if, in other words, people are bypassing the staff system, the chief of staff must address the problem. Whether by paper or in person, such “end runs” will tend to upset the balance of the decision system.

Of course, the discretion implied in these accounts is susceptible to abuse, as well as to the perception of abuse. Although H.R. Haldeman denied that he tried to control policy in the Nixon White House, the perception that he did nevertheless was strong. Thus it is important for the chief of staff to involve other White House staff in his decision processes, and to maintain confidence in the essential accessibility of both the process and the president.<sup>81</sup> Sherman Adams imposed a similar procedural rule during the Eisenhower administration.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> White House Interview Program, Interview with Mark Siegel, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., January 6, 2000.

<https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/research/transition-interviews/pdf/siegel.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2016).

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Andrew H. Card, Jr. by Martha Kumar, May 25, 1999.

<sup>79</sup> White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000.

<https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/research/transition-interviews/pdf/panetta.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2016).

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Thomas F. “Mack” McLarty by Martha Kumar, November 16, 1999, *op cit.*

<sup>81</sup> White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000, *op cit.*

<sup>82</sup> Sherman Adams, *First Hand Report* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961).

### *Adjusting and Conforming to the President's Style*

The president must feel comfortable with the people on the White House staff and the way it works. If there is not a high level of comfort, there is little chance the chief of staff or process can succeed in the long term.

Also, if a president wants to keep control of a lower level decisional or administrative matter, there is little a chief of staff can do. That such an arrangement may be ineffective needs to become obvious to a president before the system can be streamlined. Ford, Carter, Clinton, and Trump found this out the hard way at the beginning of their administrations.

Landon Butler, deputy COS in the Carter White House stated: "We were a direct reflection of what the President wanted around him and what he needed. In our case, Carter played a very hands-on role in virtually every aspect of putting the White House together."<sup>83</sup>

Mack McLarty also set up the type of system that Clinton wanted: "I think the President's style also wanted a large range of opinions, to be coordinated for sure. But he is clearly an engaged person in terms of both his political style, his personality, and his policy-making style. So that was kind of the framing of it...that's how we approached it."<sup>84</sup> In explaining this, McLarty also noted that the operation of "the White House and, to some extent the administration...was clearly driven by the campaign....You have a logical transition from the campaign to the administration. And I think, to have dramatically altered that would have created a whole other set of dynamics and problems."<sup>85</sup> A senior official familiar with the Clinton operation added:

Mack had a very untenable situation in that regard and did the best he could with that...His authority was constantly and often inadvertently or indirectly undermined by the President's willingness or indulgence...[to allow individuals who had developed a relationship with him on his campaign to see him].<sup>86</sup>

Most other recent presidents have had a different operating style, which encouraged more staff control over his schedule, speeches, and visitors. This has been the case for all but Ford, Carter and Trump. And, like Clinton, Ford rather quickly abandoned the "spokes-of-the-wheel" system of open access for a more structured system with a strong chief, even though the title "chief of staff" was officially eschewed. He was encouraged to do so by Donald Rumsfeld who accepted President Ford's offer to oversee White House operations only if he be given the authority of a chief of staff. Carter, after trying to do so without a chief of staff altogether in the style of his Democratic predecessors, ultimately turned to Hamilton Jordan, then Jack Watson as chief of staff, though Jordan was not what one would call a "strong" chief.<sup>87</sup>

The administration of George W. Bush provides a vivid illustration of the impact of a president's style. Bush, the self-styled "decider," was known for the finality of his decisions and his insistence that they be the end of debate on an issue. Former deputy chief Joe Hagin elaborated:

In this White House...you do have those good, healthy debates, and there has been disagreement between the titans of the West Wing. But once the President makes a decision, there has been remarkable unanimity in supporting what the President wants...and I think that's about as healthy of a situation as you can have in the West Wing.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Landon Butler by Martha Kumar, October 14, 1999.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty by Martha Kumar, November 16, 1999, *op cit.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Background interview.

<sup>87</sup> Chris Whipple, *The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency* (Crown, 2017).

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Joseph W. Hagin II by David B. Cohen, October 19, 2007.

However, the Bush 43 White House, like any White House, had its share of staff rivalry and internecine conflict, with much of it playing out in public view.<sup>89</sup> Staff rivalry and conflict is a challenge that every chief of staff has to grapple with in their job.

No modern president has veered more from the standard model than Donald Trump.<sup>90</sup> The specifics of Trump's distinctive presidency appear to be grounded in an approach to management that draws on his years of running a real estate business and reality TV show.<sup>91</sup> Although most modern presidents have established a disciplined staff system headed by a strong chief of staff in partnership with a strong staff secretary, Trump instituted a flatter organization in which the chief of staff was just one of many assistants with walk-in privileges.<sup>92</sup> During the first few months of the Trump presidency, over a dozen staffers (including those below the top rank of assistant to the president) were able to see the President in the Oval Office without first getting permission or at least notifying the chief of staff beforehand.<sup>93</sup> This evidently reflects Trump's comfort with a fluid agenda and talking with a variety of staffers and informal advisors; aides and other Administration officials were hired and consulted based mostly on their loyalty, not their policy expertise or experience.<sup>94</sup> Though Trump's second chief of staff, John Kelly, tried to regulate access to the President and institute a more standard model of White House organization, Trump resisted and Kelly was ultimately unsuccessful, leaving his position just sixteen months into the job.<sup>95</sup>

#### *Guarding the Door to the Oval Office*

A very important aspect of the chief of staff role is to guard the flow of people and paper into the Oval Office. Time is a valuable presidential commodity. It is up to the chief of staff to help manage it effectively. "You need to have discipline and order and be discriminating," said James Baker.<sup>96</sup>

Limiting access to the Oval Office serves another purpose. It saves the president from his friends and supporters. Presidents are politicians and as such, like to please. What they don't like to do is say "no." Thus an important function of the chief of staff is to protect the president by eliminating or reducing those politically and/or personally embarrassing situations which put a president on the spot. Sometimes, of course, obstructing access can be carried too far. Donald Regan overly protected Ronald Reagan. The President's friends had to go public to reach him. On the other hand, when H.R. Haldeman kept people out of the Oval Office, he was carrying out Nixon's wishes. According to one insider, Haldeman "was implementing Nixon's instructions faithfully, maybe harshly but doing it....He [Nixon] was a recluse...and did not enjoy the give and take of special pleadings and wouldn't do it."<sup>97</sup>

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89 E.g., see Scott McClellan, *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

90 Charles E. Walcott and Karen M. Hult, "White House Structure and Decision Making: Elaborating the Standard Model," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 35 (June 2005): 303-18

91 Scott Horsley, "How Donald Trump's Management Style Works (Or Doesn't) in the White House," NPR, February 16, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/02/16/515454435/how-donald-trumps-management-style-works-or-doesnt-in-the-white-house>, [accessed June 23, 2019].

92 James P. Pfiffner, "Organizing the Trump Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 48 (March 2018): 153-67.

93 Annie Karni, "Trump's Open-Door Oval Office," *Politico*, February 23, 2017.

<https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/donald-trump-white-house-oval-office-235278>, [accessed June 26, 2019].

94 Gwenda Blair, "Trump Has the White House He Always Wanted," *Politico Magazine*, April 5, 2018,

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/04/05/trump-tower-white-house-217778>, [accessed June 26, 2019]

95 David B. Cohen and Karen M. Hult, "The Office of the Chief of Staff in the Trump White House, 2017-2019," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50 (June 2020): 392-417.

96 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

97 Background interview.

Ultimately, the subordinate staff in the White House should know that the chief of staff is the *primus inter pares* (first among equals) in order for the COS to be effective. There needs to be an aura of respect and perhaps even fear surrounding the chief, otherwise, controlling access to POTUS will be impossible. Former U.S. Representative Zack Space (D-OH) described it this way: “you don’t want someone in the position whose going to be everybody’s friend. That’s not the job. You need a prick....I don’t think it’s a job for a shrinking violet.”<sup>98</sup>

The chief is not only responsible for screening the issues and individuals who clamor for access to the Oval Office, but they are more generally tasked with protecting the president, the president’s time, and the president’s interests, whether from a hostile press and Congress, wayward members of the administration, or even the consequences of the president’s own actions. In fact, this notion of being a president’s political bodyguard is what makes the COS position a unique one in American government.<sup>99</sup> Chiefs of staff must perform unpopular tasks such as firing personnel, saying “no” to specific requests, and generally acting as the president’s enforcer. Richard Cheney, Gerald Ford’s second COS recalled, “I was the SOB, and on a number of occasions, got involved in shouting matches with the vice-president [Nelson Rockefeller]” in the process of buffering the relationship between the President and Vice-president.<sup>100</sup>

Because of the distasteful tasks chiefs of staff must often carry out, most every COS finds themselves on the hot seat eventually. As Haldeman’s boss wrote, “A good chief-of-staff is seldom popular. He must carry out tough decisions...that his boss makes but is reluctant to execute...he sometimes finds he doesn’t have many friends or supporters” (Nixon 1990: 274).<sup>101</sup> Of course, a chief can abuse this power which can detract from the White House environment and harm the president they are serving. Thus, the chief of staff must always accept blame, but pass credit along to their boss.

Presidents also need to be protected from what James Baker called “oh-by-the-way decisions”—decisions that are made on the spur of the moment by POTUS without staff consultation or consideration of consequences after an aide or cabinet member pulls the president aside to lobby them. Stated Baker: “It’s not in anyone’s interest to get ‘oh-by-the-way decisions’ as a guy is leaving a meeting.” One way to discourage this practice is for presidents to issue a generic warning at their first cabinet meeting that such practices will be considered out of order and not tolerated.<sup>102</sup>

Because the job of the staff is to run interference for the president, especially when the discussion veers from the prepared agenda, “the chief of staff needs to know what the president is telling people and what they’re telling him. You need to have an understanding with him about it.”<sup>103</sup> In Reagan’s case, he regularly informed his staff if he met with anyone without the staff being present. In G.H.W. Bush’s case, unless the meeting was listed as private, an aide from the Office of the Chief of Staff would be in attendance.<sup>104</sup> This has been a particular challenge in the Trump White House as President Trump is notorious for calling friends and supporters from his private quarters to solicit political opinions and advice.<sup>105</sup>

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98 Interview with Zachary T. Space by David B. Cohen, December 9, 2013.

99 David B. Cohen, Karen M. Hult, & Charles E. Walcott, “White House Evolution and Institutionalization: The Office of Chief of Staff since Reagan,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 46,1 (March 2016): 4-29

100 Samuel Kernell and Samuel L. Popkin, eds. *Chief of Staff: Twenty-Five Years of Managing the Presidency* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986):175-6.

101 Richard M. Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat and Renewal* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1990):274.

102 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

103 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

104 White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999, *op cit*.

105 David B. Cohen and Karen M. Hult, “The Office of the Chief of Staff in the Trump White House, 2017-2019,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50 (June 2020): 392-417.

Being with the president also involves traveling with him. Either the chief of staff or a designated deputy should accompany POTUS on all trips away from the White House.

### *Coordinating Presidential Appearances and Statements*

Best practices show that the Office of Chief of Staff must be involved in scheduling the president, which includes long-range (perhaps three months) planning. The COS need not personally be deeply involved, however. For instance, in the first Reagan term, James Baker delegated responsibility for scheduling (along with communications and relations with the First Lady and her office) to deputy Michael Deaver.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, Henson Moore had responsibility for scheduling, and also had the speechwriters and the press office reporting to him. But whether it is the chief of staff or a deputy, all these streams—where the president will be, what the president will say, and how attention will be gained for it—must come together.

As gatekeeper, the chief of staff must review all presidential schedules, briefings, and speeches. Much of the friction between Panetta and Dick Morris, President Clinton's controversial political/campaign adviser, stemmed from Morris' penchant for changing speeches that had gone through the chief of staff clearance process. So strongly did Panetta object to this end-running, that he threatened to quit unless it was stopped. And it was. The Wednesday night meetings in the Executive Residence were used to bring the campaign principals together to debate and attempt to iron-out differences.<sup>107</sup> Such special-purpose group meetings, regular or ad hoc, can be used to supplement the normal staff meetings in planning and integrating the president's schedule and message.

### *MANAGING INFORMATION AND BROKERING OPINIONS*

In performing the gatekeeper's role, the chief of staff must function as an honest broker. Practically all of the former White House officials interviewed considered such a role essential. James Baker was advised by a predecessor: "Be an honest broker. Don't use the process to impose your policy views on the president." The president needs to see all sides. He can't be blindsided.<sup>108</sup>

Additionally, cabinet members need to know that their position will be fairly represented, especially if they encounter difficulty in presenting it themselves. Mack McLarty noted that with the former chiefs he talked with there was a:

high degree of consensus about the honest-broker approach: that the chief of staff certainly needed to be viewed by cabinet members and others as someone who would not shape information in a way that would unduly affect the president's decision-making. The cabinet officers and others had the right to expect their information to be fairly presented.<sup>109</sup>

Honest brokerage does not mean being without opinions or convictions, or refusing to offer them when asked by POTUS. It does, however, mean assuring that the decision process will include all relevant points of view, without allowing the agenda or views of the chief of staff to bias or distort that process.<sup>110</sup> Nor is it enough to be, in fact, an honest broker—the chief of staff must be *perceived* as such by those seeking access, in person or for their ideas, to the president.

Although chiefs disagreed on how tight personal access to the president should be, there was unanimity that it should be administered fairly with sensitivity to the position of those who wished to gain an audience. As James Baker put it, "You walk around with a target on your chest and on your back. You use up your chits pretty quickly because the job of the chief of staff is to say 'no'

106 Interview with Michael Deaver by Martha Kumar, September 9, 1999.

107 Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), pp.158-59.

108 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

109 Interview with Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty by Martha Kumar, November 16, 1999, *op cit*.

110 Interview with Jerry Jones by Martha Kumar, April 11, 2000.

to people. Everybody wants something from the president, and your job is to say no or say yes, maybe, but.”<sup>111</sup>

Being a good listener is another attribute of the honest brokering function. According to Howard Baker, “There wasn’t a day went by when in a senior staff meeting somebody didn’t point out to me something that I didn’t know about and was not sensitive to. It was an early warning system that worked very well.”<sup>112</sup>

Perhaps the key element in the role of the broker is the process of soliciting opinions prior to presidential decisions—a process that also can work in the direction of consensus building. While the primary responsibility for doing this, usually via formal memoranda, falls to the staff secretary, it is a process the chief of staff must monitor. It is the main point at which people will attempt to get access to the decision process—even to the point of White House staffers substituting their views for, e.g., a cabinet member’s. As Howard Baker’s deputy, John Tuck, said:

Well, that’s exactly the level of detail where it occurs, in the staffing of the memo that’s going to the president, the decision memo with the options describing the discussion, describing the options. And all the fights occur on just exactly that level of detail. We tried not to let that spill up to the president but sometimes the memos were so controversial—and I can only think of one or two where the memo was bigger than it should have been because we just couldn’t forge a consensus about what this paper would look like.<sup>113</sup>

As a broker, the chief of staff is also responsible for presidential briefings. The regular morning meeting between the president and chief of staff are a time for briefings. But for more formal briefings, involving multiple participants, the chief normally works with other staffers. Panetta described such a process:

Just to give you an example, clearly, national security issues where there were decisions related to what was going to happen in Bosnia, what was going to happen in Iraq, what was going to happen in the Middle East. Those are, clearly, issues that would go to the President. What I would do is work with the national security adviser and basically set up the briefing so they could make their presentation to the President...And, because of the nature of this president, usually even on scheduling issues, you’d go in with a schedule. You’d present a proposed schedule to the President, but you would let him obviously comment on that as well.<sup>114</sup>

Not only is the chief of staff expected to be an honest broker, but so are his deputies. George W. Bush’s deputy chief of staff for policy, Joel Kaplan, expressed that he tried:

to be an honest broker because you do spend more time with the president and you have opportunities to catch him for two minutes here or three minutes there, when you’re not in a big policy time discussion. It would be demoralizing to your colleagues and his other advisers if they thought that those periods of time were being used to sort of undermine them or come in behind...It is more important that the president have in that deputy chief of staff role somebody who views it as their primary responsibility to just make sure that all of the information he needs is getting to him, not being the smartest guy in the room, or giving your own opinion.<sup>115</sup>

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111 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

112 Interview with Howard Baker in Interview with Howard Baker & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

113 Interview with John Tuck in Interview with Howard Baker & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

114 White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000, *op cit*.

115 Interview with Joel D. Kaplan by David B. Cohen, October 19, 2007.

## ADVISORY ROLES

### POLITICS, POLICY, AND MANAGEMENT

Although the chief of staff is first and foremost an honest broker, it is unlikely that a staffer so close to a president would not be called upon as an adviser, as well. This is particularly true in areas of the chief's special interest or competence. Leon Panetta, for example, as a former OMB director, was an adviser on budgetary matters.<sup>116</sup> Mack McLarty, with a background in private business, advised President Clinton on his economic planning.<sup>117</sup> Denis McDonough, President Obama's last chief, who had a deep background in security studies and came to the COS job from the NSC, was a very important adviser on national security and foreign policy issues.<sup>118</sup>

One important aspect of advising is integrating policy and politics. Most other advisers, inside and outside the White House, specialize in one or the other. But the chief of staff is expected to be conversant with both. For example, James Baker discussed the advice President George H.W. Bush received concerning the economy in 1992:

I want to tell you the problem there was not so much that President Bush wasn't listening to (his advisers)...But he was listening to his economic advisers, who were giving him good economic advice—*good economic advice*—but lousy political advice. This, I think, was the fault of the White House staff and organization at the time. They should have been able to see that, while the economy might not have needed any action...we nevertheless needed an economic or domestic policy agenda around which to coalesce a campaign.<sup>119</sup>

More generally, Baker described the Office of the Chief of Staff as “the place where policy and politics come together.”<sup>120</sup>

### PROTECTING THE PRESIDENT'S INTERESTS

The role of the chief of staff as adviser to the president is inherently problematic since as it has the potential to conflict with the role of honest broker. Nevertheless, the chief of staff is often required to advise, especially when that consists of carrying bad news or disagreement to the president. Others may want to, but often find that they cannot. This falls under the category of protecting the interests of the president. One former chief of staff spoke to this issue:

You've got to have a person who can tell you what they think...and it's rare when you're president. Most people come up to me as chief of staff and say I'm going in and tell him it's the dumbest thing I've ever seen and he's simply got to change it. They get in there, slobber all over him, kiss his ring, tell him how wonderful he is, leave and walk out and say, gee, I really told him. I'd say that's the most groveling, sycophantic behavior I've ever seen in my life. And they say, no, I told him....People just simply do not walk in, point their finger at the president and say, look: that's wrong.<sup>121</sup>

Henson Moore explained:

There's something about a president being in the Oval Office, there's something about the aura of the power of a president, that people just won't say what really needs to be said to a president—except a very choice few people who are so close to him and were so close to him before he was

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116 White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000, *op cit*.

117 Interview with Thomas F. “Mack” McLarty by Martha Kumar, November 16, 1999, *op cit*.

118 Glenn Thrush, “Obama's Obama,” *Politico Magazine*, January/February 2016.

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/denis-mcdonough-profile-213488> (accessed June 29, 2020).

119 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

120 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

121 Background interview.

president that they can overcome it—or they have such a position of trust and respect held for them by the president that they don't feel intimidated.<sup>122</sup>

Generally, chiefs are charged with protecting the president, the president's time, and the president's interests, whether from a hostile press and Congress, wayward members of the administration, or even the consequences of the president's own actions. Chiefs of staff must perform unpopular tasks such as firing personnel, saying "no" to specific requests, and generally acting as the president's enforcer. As Richard Cheney, Gerald Ford's second chief recalled, "I was the SOB, and on a number of occasions, got involved in shouting matches with the vice-president [Nelson Rockefeller]" in the process of buffering the relationship between the president and vice-president.<sup>123</sup>

Sometimes chiefs are not given the necessary authority to protect the president or are not trusted completely by the president. Sam Skinner faced this situation when he took over for John Sununu in the Bush 41 administration. Skinner's deputy observed that "neither one of us, I don't think, did the President have that close respect for, like a Jim Baker, to where he'd sit and listen to us. We were staff and he listened to us politely but, if his initial instinct was different from mine or Sam's, he'd go with his initial instinct. We did not have the ability to turn him from that."<sup>124</sup> A factor that aggravated this problem in the Bush 41 White House was the President's decision to keep White House operations separate from the campaign. This effectively kept Skinner out of the political loop and greatly limited his overall influence, even with elements of his own staff.<sup>125</sup>

The protection of the president's interests is perhaps most crucial in times of crisis. The Iran-Contra affair in the Reagan administration illustrated what can happen when the advisory system fails to work well. James Baker made that clear:

When [President Reagan] got in trouble was when that system broke down after I left and after Mike Deaver left, particularly. They got him to agree to some things on Iran-Contra and other things that were a mistake. Bill Casey always wanted to go in there and see the President by himself. But as long as the President would tell us, then we could act to either say, "Wait a minute. Do you really want to do this or do you not?"<sup>126</sup>

The Tower Commission, appointed to investigate the Iran-Contra affair, asserted that COS Donald Regan bore central responsibility for the scandal:

More than almost any chief of staff in recent memory, he [Regan] asserted personal control over the White house staff and sought to extend his control to the National Security Advisor. He was personally active in national security affairs and attended almost all of the relevant meetings regarding the Iran initiative. He, as much as anyone, should have insisted that an orderly process be observed....He must bear primary responsibility for the chaos that descended upon the White House when such disclosure did occur.<sup>127</sup>

When Reagan needed a guardian most, the chief of staff failed spectacularly.

122 White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999, *op cit*.

123 Samuel Kernell and Samuel L. Popkin, eds., *Chief of Staff: Twenty-Five Years of Managing the Presidency* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 175-6.

124 White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999, *op cit*.

125 Interview with Samuel Skinner by Martha Kumar, April 24, 2000.

126 Interview with James A. Baker III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999; see also Interview with Michael Deaver by Martha Kumar, September 9, 1999.

127 John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft, *The Tower Commission Report* (New York: Times Books, 1987), p.81.

Mack McLarty also faced a crisis when the Whitewater accusations began to fly. Here, protection of the President's interests had more to do with coping with forces beyond the presidency. He described his approach:

The way you deal with that...is to really try to segment it and separate it as much as you possibly can, and isolate it. You've got to deal with it, but we did set up quickly a task force to deal with it. Therefore, you got people who are concentrating on this, capable, skilled, dealing with the issues. And then that allows, obviously, the agenda to go forward in the broader sense.<sup>128</sup>

Presidents may even need to be protected from themselves. H.R. Haldeman, President Nixon's chief of staff, wrote:

I soon realized that this President had to be protected from himself. Time and again I would receive petty vindictive orders....after a Senator made an anti-Vietnam War speech: "Put a 24-hour surveillance on that bastard." And so on and on and on. If I took no action, I would pay for it. The President never let up. He'd be on the intercom buzzing me ten minutes after such an order....I'd say "I'm working on it," and delay and delay until Nixon would one day comment, with a sort of half-smile on his face, "I guess you never took action on that, did you?" "No." "Well, I guess it was the best thing."<sup>129</sup>

### ***NEGOTIATING WITH THE ENVIRONMENT CONGRESS, THE DEPARTMENTS, AND OTHERS***

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Chiefs of staff agree that chiefs need to get around. They cannot remain cloistered in the White House. However, one of the areas of difference among the various chiefs of staff was how much visibility they should personally have. Howard Baker, James Baker, Richard Cheney, and Kenneth Duberstein all urged that a chief of staff to stay in the background and not become the center of attention. James Baker saw it as a function of the chief of staff to keep the press informed of developments, but to do it on background. "That's not leaking, that's spinning," he said.<sup>130</sup> Increasingly, however, chiefs have functioned as spokespersons, negotiators, and occasionally, as go-betweens on key issues: John Sununu linked the Bush 41 White House to conservative groups, James Baker to the Republican political establishment in 1992, Mack McLarty developed and maintained the Clinton administration's contacts with the business community, and William Daley was hired in 2011 to do the same thing in the Obama White House.<sup>131</sup>

A key element of the role of most recent chiefs of staff has been congressional relations. Though the White House has an office that specializes in this, the chief of staff has nonetheless become a major administration proxy, at least since the emergence of James Baker in that role in the early Reagan years. Prior to that, even a former member of Congress like Donald Rumsfeld did relatively little in that area.<sup>132</sup>

That a number of modern chiefs had served in Congress helped burnish their credentials and increased expectations that they would take an active role in that area. Six chiefs of staff previously served in Congress, three of whom came directly from the legislature to the COS job: Donald Rumsfeld, Howard Baker, Leon Panetta, Rahm Emanuel, Mick Mulvaney, and Mark Meadows. Meadows, who left his seat in the US House of Representatives to become Donald Trump's chief of staff, immediately became an influential proxy. During negotiations between the Trump White House and the Democrat-led leadership team of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) over a financial relief package for Americans during the coronavirus pandemic, Meadows and Secretary

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128 Interview with Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty by Martha Kumar, November 16, 1999, *op cit*.

129 H.R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), pp.58-9.

130 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

131 David B. Cohen, Karen M. Hult, and Charles E. Walcott, "The Chicago Clan: The Chiefs of Staff in the Obama White House," *Social Science Quarterly*, 93 (December 2012): 1101-26

132 Interview with Donald Rumsfeld by Martha Kumar, April 25, 2000.

of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin led the White House team during the summer of 2020. Many observers blamed Meadows for the failure of the two sides to come to an agreement and secure an aid package.<sup>133</sup>

A more common view among more recent chiefs was that of Howard Baker: “I think it’s enormously important... for a president to have a good understanding of the Congress and what’s going on up there and even perhaps a good relationship. A chief of staff from that setting can help almost always. Leon Panetta helped and I think I helped.”<sup>134</sup> John Tuck went so far as to say that Baker “became in fact the congressional affairs guy as well as the chief of staff” because members trusted him and “knew what he said would be the policy of the administration.”<sup>135</sup> While that will not often be the case, Andrew Card nonetheless estimated that congressional relations is “probably a good 30 per cent of the responsibility” of the chief of staff.<sup>136</sup>

Another “external” aspect of the chief of staff job is managing the media. The chief of staff may be asked to play a public role as spokesperson for the administration on Sunday talk shows and the like. Beyond that, there is much room for a quieter role. As James Baker pointed out: “You have to be willing to background the press. Background, not leak. There’s a big difference. But one of the things Cheney told me before I took the job, he said, ‘Be sure you spend a lot of time with the press giving them your spin, why you’re doing these things. Talk to them. But always do it invisibly.’”<sup>137</sup> Baker argued that the “on the record” public presence, attempted by Donald Regan, worked less well because “nobody wanted to hear it from the chief of staff. He wasn’t elected. They wanted to hear it from the president.”<sup>138</sup>

Leon Panetta met regularly with the press for formal and informal briefings:

You met with press in the Roosevelt Room, to brief them on issues. For example, if we were putting out a budget, or putting out a major issue, either economic issue or major domestic issue, and you wanted to make sure that the press would give it the kind of emphasis that we wanted, you would do briefings. Sometimes, it was a briefing in the Roosevelt Room. Sometimes I was part of a briefing in the press room. Then, sometimes, I would do a one-on-one briefing with a reporter in the Chief of Staff’s office. And it varied depending on what the issue was. I didn’t do that for everything.<sup>139</sup>

Clinton Deputy Chief of Staff John Podesta, was put in charge of the damage control operation surrounding the White house intern scandal. This included working the Hill, organizing the defense within the White House, and speaking with the media.<sup>140</sup> Later as COS, Podesta became a visible and public spokesperson on behalf of the President and the entire administration during the ensuing impeachment process: “[At first] we thought it was important to send the lawyers out... [but] the American public couldn’t understand all the legalese, and so I became the surrogate and tried to explain this matter in ways that ordinary people could understand... I got to sit in the dunking tank.”<sup>141</sup>

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133 Ed Kilgore, “Mark Meadows Has Been a Game Changer in Stimulus Talks, and Not in a Good Way,” *The New Yorker*, September 1, 2020. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/09/meadows-has-been-negative-game-changer-in-stimulus-talks.html> (accessed September 7, 2020).

134 Interview with Howard Baker in Interview with Howard Baker & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

135 Interview with John Tuck in Interview with Howard Baker & John Tuck, by Martha Kumar, November 12, 1999.

136 Interview with Andrew H. Card, Jr. by Martha Kumar, May 25, 1999.

137 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

138 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

139 White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000, *op cit*.

140 Lloyd Grove, “John Podesta: Clinton’s Mr. Fix it,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 1998.

141 John D. Podesta, “Interview,” *Nightline/Frontline*, June 2006

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/clinton/interviews/podesta.html>.

In the Bush 43 White House, neither Andrew Card nor Josh Bolten spent much time in the public spotlight. Media appearances by the chiefs of staff were used with the clear goal of advancing the president's agenda. Observed Bolten about the Sunday political talk show circuit:

I don't do something like that unless I feel that I'm well prepared. My first priority is to manage the staff and respond to the president rather than making a public figure out of myself. If it's to advance the administration's agenda and the communications people come to me and say: 'You're the best spokesman to go out on Sunday on this issue,' I'll of course do it.<sup>142</sup>

Rahm Emanuel was quite accessible to the news media, embracing the role of media proxy during his tenure as Obama COS. A frequent guest on political news shows, he used them to announce controversial policies or tactics of the administration with a level of candor that journalists found rare in Washington. Emanuel was a very public face, assuming a higher profile than most chiefs. Unlike James Baker who preferred to work in the shadows, Emanuel was willing to speak on the record and to comment on almost every issue.<sup>143</sup>

The chief of staff also may become involved in cabinet relations, though this is likely to be a smaller part of the job. The White House normally has a cabinet secretary to handle most of the load. Indeed, a veteran of the office noted that "there is natural tension between the chief of staff and a cabinet." Presidents have varied in whether they have given the chief of staff cabinet rank, though all recent chiefs have had that rank. The same official's take on that was "I don't know that it makes any difference."

Finally, the chief of staff must deal in some ways with interest groups, at least to the extent of scheduling the president for fundraisers. In turn, according to Panetta, the White House must be sensitive to donors:

These are the kind of big players who are always around....They are constantly the people you turn to because they have the money for these events. I think, as a result of that, there is without question a greater sensitivity to the issues that they are involved with....Now, does it control policy, which is the major question in the minds of the American people? Does it control policy? Not necessarily but it sure as hell has an impact as far as decisions that are made. It is a factor and it is a growing factor.<sup>144</sup>

Panetta reported that he did feel obligated to meet with and listen to such people.<sup>145</sup>

## PERSONAL STYLES AND ATTRIBUTES

### THE VARIETY OF APPROACHES AND PEOPLE

Presidents and chiefs of staff come from a variety of backgrounds, display a diversity of personal strengths, weaknesses, and operating styles, and encounter widely differing circumstances during their time in the White House. These factors will, no doubt, impact the effectiveness of the chief of staff and White House operations.

Much of the advice relevant to this mix of factors is embedded in what has transpired previously. Certainly the key is for the chief of staff to adapt to the style of the president. The hands-on approach of Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton certainly required a different form of staff support than the hands-off approach of Ronald Reagan.<sup>146</sup> Likewise, the temperament,

142 Bradley H. Patterson, Jr. *To Serve the President: Continuity and Innovation in the White House Staff* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2008), p.48.

143 Dana Milbank, "At Breakfast with Emanuel, A Side of Sausage-Making," *Washington Post*, June 26, 2009.

144 White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000, *op cit*.

145 *Ibid*.

146 Interview with James A. Baker III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999; Interview with Landon Butler by Martha Kumar, October 14, 1999; Interview with Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty by Martha Kumar, November 16, 1999, *op cit*.

intellectual curiosity, analytic capability, and decision-making style of the president requires adjustments. Presidents such as Carter, Bush 41, Clinton, and Obama that could consume and process voluminous amounts of data and information require a wholly different approach from their staff than presidents such as Reagan and Trump who were uninterested or unable to grapple with large quantities of information. For example, Barack Obama received a large PDB (President's Daily Brief) of twelve-to-fourteen pages on an iPad complete with hyperlinks and supporting materials; Donald Trump prefers a short one-to-three page brief composed of bullet points and visuals. This difference in quantity and substance was evident in other briefing materials as well.<sup>147</sup> Thus differing presidential preferences will impact the quantity and quality of policy-making artifacts POTUS will have at their disposal to make a decision.

An essential factor is achieving the trust of the president. Leon Panetta stated that: "The first and foremost quality that is essential is trust. You've got to have their trust. To some extent, you have to build that trust because you're just going into a job, you have to prove yourself. But, ultimately, if you have that trust and you develop that trust, you can do the job."<sup>148</sup>

One also needs to adapt to the various other prominent actors in the White House. In recent administrations, that has clearly included the vice president and first lady. Mack McLarty on Vice President Al Gore's role in the Clinton administration:

I felt strongly about...the vice president being integrated into the Office of the President. Clinton and Gore clearly ran as a team; the Vice President was someone of real standing, a strong personality. And the President's wishes were to have Vice President Gore as an integral part of the team, and to make that a meaningful, influential position...and, therefore, to keep the Vice President in the information flow and in important meetings, and so forth. And also have certain areas he would have direct responsibility for.<sup>149</sup>

Although the Bush 43 organizational model worked well in many instances, particularly in the lack of end-runs and leaks that befuddled so many modern administrations, there were instances where the independent role of Vice President Richard Cheney and his office interfered in the policy and political process and subverted the chief's and deputy chief's ability to be honest brokers of the process. Numerous former Bush staffers and Bush White House observers have noted Cheney's inordinate amount of influence on a host of major policy decisions, many in security policy but also in domestic areas such as federal court nominations, tax, education, and environmental policy. Ultimately, Cheney's freelancing was reigned in during the second term, but not until the impression became calcified that he was the most influential VP in history who had an outsized influence over the President.<sup>150</sup>

First ladies have also become major components of the modern White House, perhaps none more so than Hillary Clinton, who was the first and only presidential spouse in history to have a West Wing office. Leon Panetta elaborated upon the importance of the first lady:

I think, if there's anything that is probably as common a trend in the White House as presidents who don't want to offend people, it's that they have very tough first ladies who have been through

147 Ashley Dejean, "Classified Memo Tells Intelligence Analysts to Keep Trump's Daily Briefing Short," Mother Jones, February 16, 2017. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/02/classified-memo-tells-intelligence-analysts-keep-trumps-daily-brief-short/>, [accessed June 27, 2020]

148 White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000, *op cit*.

149 Interview with Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty by Martha Kumar, November 16, 1999, *op cit*.

150 See e.g., Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013); Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Barton Gellman, *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); Jack Goldsmith, *The Terror Presidency: Law and Judgment Inside the Bush Administration* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned Into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); Shirley Anne Warshaw, *The Co-Presidency of Bush and Cheney*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford Politics and Policy, 2009).

a lot of the battles. And just by the nature of what they've gone through, are very strong individuals.<sup>151</sup>

Panetta developed a weekly briefing session for Hillary Clinton for the first six or eight months of his tenure as chief of staff. After that, the necessary trust having been established, the meetings “kind of faded away.”<sup>152</sup> Similarly, in the Reagan White House, part of Michael Deaver's value as deputy chief of staff lay in the confidence that Nancy Reagan placed in him.<sup>153</sup> When Deaver left, Donald Regan was unable to establish such a relationship, which helped lead to his downfall.

Regardless of background, one final piece of people-oriented advice from James Baker applies to all who would be chief:

One very important rule in Washington generally is to surround yourself with the best people you can get. People who are so insecure that they are not willing to put really good people in as their deputies don't succeed. If they're worried so much about their own visibility or public persona that they're not going to put somebody strong in, then they're going to fail.<sup>154</sup>

### **“YOU ARE NOT THE PRESIDENT”**

Chiefs of staff come from a variety of backgrounds. Washington savvy, as noted above, is a desirable trait regardless of background. But there was at least a suggestion that people who have been chief executives, in either the public or private sector, have a harder time adjusting to the staff role than others do, as both Governors Sherman Adams and John Sununu and Treasury Secretary Donald Regan, and former Merrill Lynch CEO, discovered. A former official noted, “I think the most difficult thing for a governor to make the change to becoming a chief of staff is that a governor is a principal and a chief of staff is staff. You must realize that the spotlight is not supposed to be shining on me; it is supposed to be shining on the other guy.”<sup>155</sup> Marlin Fitzwater, who served under Reagan and Bush, uttered a similar refrain: “In the end every chief of staff is a servant of the president, and the more independence they ask for or try to carve out for themselves, the more likely they are to fail.”<sup>156</sup>

James Baker emphasized the importance of the chief never forgetting the staff component of their title to remember they are staff, not elected or appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. “The chief of staff has the second most powerful job in government but it's staff. The minute you forget that you're in trouble.”<sup>157</sup> In another interview, Baker repeated much the same warning,

You're really powerful but every bit of that power is derivative from the president. The minute you forget that you get in trouble. And it would be totally inappropriate to call a committee chairman and say, “Come down to my office to negotiate.” Sometimes they might want to. If one of them wanted to come down, that's fine. You do that. But generally speaking, I went up there and I spent a lot of time up there.<sup>158</sup>

Ken Duberstein, Ronald Reagan's last COS, made the point with a story of a “crusty Democratic congressman” who once said to him, “Duberstein, you're smarter than 95 per cent

151 White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000. , *op cit*.

152 *Ibid*.

153 Interview with Michael Deaver by Martha Kumar, September 9, 1999.

154 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

155 Background interview.

156 Interview with Marlin Fitzwater by Martha Kumar, October 21, 1999.

157 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

158 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, November 16, 1999.

of the SOB's up here. You know it and we know it. But what you have to remember is we're elected and you ain't." One of the best pieces of advice I ever got.<sup>159</sup>

Not only must chiefs of staff keep their own egos in check, but they must be sensitive to the egos and interests of others who work in the White House. Long hours, constant pressures, and personal ambitions, can produce dysfunctional behavior that undercuts a team effort. According to Henson Moore:

The hours are very long. The pressure is very great to succeed for the president, to have him be successful. The internecine warfare and backstabbing is more acute there than I ever saw in the department, or ever saw in the Congress. If something goes wrong, you don't want to be blamed for it; you want to put the blame on somebody else. You want to have an exit strategy that you leave as a hero not as a dog.<sup>160</sup>

Roy Neel, deputy chief of staff in the Clinton administration, offered a similar warning:

The White House...nurtures junkies who grow to feel like they have to have this rush of the daily pressures and the high stakes stuff. That can be good for a while but it does burn people out. Someone has to be there to evaluate when someone has burned out. You can't leave it to the individuals to decide when they've lost their effectiveness.<sup>161</sup>

## DEVELOPING A DAILY SCHEDULE

### COMPONENTS

The daily schedule of the chief of staff has several components. The first and primary component is to ensure that the president's daily schedule accomplishes what POTUS needs at that point in time. Every meeting the president has should be discussed with the COS before being put on the schedule. The chief of staff should review the president's daily schedule with his staff to check if any changes or modifications are needed. When the schedule calls for presidential travel, as it often will, either the chief of staff or a deputy chief of staff need be a part of the traveling party, performing the kind of coordination on the road that the chief of staff provides in the White House itself.<sup>162</sup>

Another facet of the daily schedule of the chief of staff is to ensure that every speech POTUS makes or position the White House takes is consistent with broad presidential themes. Every major policy that moves through the White House should be cleared by the chief of staff.

The third component of the daily schedule is representing POTUS in meetings with members of Congress, the departments, or constituent groups. The chief of staff as proxy has the authority to negotiate on behalf of the president within certain boundaries.<sup>163</sup>

The chief of staff is the trainmaster of the White House and they have to make sure the trains run on time, but the chief also needs to make sure they don't collide.<sup>164</sup> If the chief of staff does not personally oversee all of this activity, a designated deputy should be given both the responsibility and the authority.

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<sup>159</sup> Interview with Kenneth Duberstein by Martha Kumar, August 12, 1999.

<sup>160</sup> White House Interview Program, Interview with W. Henson Moore, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 15, 1999, *op cit*.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Roy Neel by Martha Kumar, June 15, 1999.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Joseph W. Hagin II by David B. Cohen, October 19, 2007; Interview with Samuel Skinner by Martha Kumar, April 24, 2000.

<sup>163</sup> David B. Cohen, Karen M. Hult, and Charles E. Walcott, "White House Evolution and Institutionalization: The Office of Chief of Staff since Reagan." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 46, #1 (March 2016): 4-29

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Andrew H. Card, Jr. by Martha Kumar, May 25, 1999.

There is a clear rhythm in all administrations. The morning meetings of the chief of staff often begin with a small group of top staff within the chief's office, then move to a larger meeting that includes all senior staff, and finally to a private meeting between the chief and the president, all by around 9:00 am. The chief may also attend the president's national security briefing which usually occurs in the early morning. In the occasional instance where this pattern has not been faithfully followed, problems have arisen. Samuel Skinner, for instance, notes that this was not always the case during his term as chief of staff, but advises that it ought to be.<sup>165</sup>

With some variation across and even within administrations, the White House day generally begins early—between 7:00 and 7:30 a.m. Using the Bush 41 administration as an example, the morning meeting was conducted at 7:00 am and included the deputy chiefs of staff, and often the press secretary, congressional liaison, and the OMB director. Overnight issues such as national emergencies, economic reports, or intelligence materials were addressed here. The 7:00 a.m. discussion provided a framework for the larger meeting of senior staff at 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. The senior staff meeting included top White House aides, most of whom carry the designation “Assistant to the President.” This group, tended to be 10-15 in number and was overseen by the chief of staff. There was a sense throughout the various administrations that only senior staff should attend, not their designees. The senior staff meetings usually began with a discussion of the schedule of the president's day.<sup>166</sup> The Clinton White House under Panetta mimicked this pattern: the senior staff meeting would begin at 7:00 a.m. followed by a larger meeting with lower-level staff which would conclude by 8:30 a.m. on most days.<sup>167</sup>

After these morning staff gatherings, the chief of staff usually meets alone with the president (usually at 8:30 or 9:00), depending on the president's personal schedule. At this meeting the president is briefed on his schedule for the day, issues in Congress, and other matters that emerged in the earlier staff meetings.

Some variations of the daily schedule of the chief of staff involve the re-election process when the chief might meet in the evenings with campaign staff, budget negotiations and other dealings with members of Congress, and national crises.

## CONCLUSION

The tasks of the chief of staff and Office of the Chief of Staff are many, varied, subtle and critically important to the success of a presidency. While there can be no simple prescription for doing the job right, certain principles do emerge from the experiences of those who have held the position. Very briefly summarized, they are:

✓ ***Gain Control***

The White House is large and complex, and its responses to events must often be immediate. This is not an environment conducive to lengthy discussion or loose management. Successful chiefs have been “strong” ones, but not self-interested or autocratic.

✓ ***Adapt to the Stylistic Preferences and Needs of the President***

Just as presidents differ, optimal approaches to working with them will also. Nothing is more important to remember than that the power of the chief of staff derives only from the president. A chief who forgets this precept, who acts as if he were POTUS, will get into trouble eventually.

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<sup>165</sup> Interview with Samuel Skinner by Martha Kumar, April 24, 2000.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Phillip Brady by Martha Kumar, August 17, 1999.

<sup>167</sup> Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), pp.140-141.

- ✓ ***Protect the President***  
Adjusting to the presidential style does not preclude compensating for presidential weaknesses. Sometimes presidents are wrong and in extreme cases presidential orders must be ignored for the president's and country's sake. Help the president avoid making "oh, by-the-way" decisions, where commitments are made without sufficient staffing or thoughtful consideration.<sup>168</sup>
- ✓ ***Choose Bright, Trustworthy and Loyal Subordinates***  
Be willing to delegate work to subordinates knowing that the task will get done as it should.
- ✓ ***Be an Honest Broker.***  
The COS and their deputies should strive, whenever possible, to oversee the policy and advisory processes in as fair a manner as possible.
- ✓ ***Run a Lean Shop, be Flexible, and Establish a Rhythm***  
Under most circumstances, keep the Office of the Chief of Staff office itself relatively lean, to keep the management challenges of that office reasonable. Be sensitive for the need of informal, fluid, often temporary organizational devices (regular meetings, war rooms, etc.) to cope with particular problems and opportunities. In addition to establishing clear rhythms for normal presidential and White House days, be careful to include in discussions and decisions only those with a need and competence to be there, but beware insularity. At the same time, be careful not to create groups that are too unwieldy to accomplish their work.

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168 Interview with James A. Baker, III by Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan, July 7, 1999.

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