



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—36

## THE OFFICE OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS

Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, *Senior Fellow, The Miller Center, University of Virginia*  
*Nonresident Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution*  
*Senior Research Director, The White House Transition Project*

## WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

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

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

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

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

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY\*

The White House Office of Political Affairs (OPA) is largely an outreach office whose goal is to marshal political support for the president's electoral and policy interests. According to presidential scholar, Bradley Patterson, "In recognition of the political 'everything,' there is a White House staff group which, while specializing in 'politics,' reaches into the whole presidential universe."<sup>1</sup> Reagan political adviser, Lyn Nofziger, stated the goal somewhat more bluntly, "The idea is to make sure that the White House bestows its favors -- campaign appearances, endorsements, coordination of grant announcements -- in the most effective way possible."<sup>2</sup> Through the acquisition of political intelligence and the doling out of presidential largesse, this relatively new and small office within the White House seeks not only to maintain the president's electoral coalition, but to expand it--ultimately boosting the prospect of reelection. Though OPA has had a relatively short and somewhat rocky history, it has maintained its primary role as the "political eyes and ears" of the White House.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Though the position was not formally named until the Reagan administration, its roots emerged in the Roosevelt administration when presidents began distancing themselves from the national party organization. "Presidential leadership during the New Deal prepared the executive branch to be a government unto itself and established the presidency rather than the party as the locus of political responsibility."<sup>3</sup> During the Eisenhower administration, rather than delegating political business to the party organization, such duties were conducted by the Executive Branch Liaison Office. Since then, presidents continuously hired "political" staff members whose job was to oversee the party organization and keep their eye on the political pulse. Staff members like Larry O'Brien, Marvin Watson, Harry Dent,

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\* This essay borrows heavily from my article, "Institutionalized Politics: The White House Office of Political Affairs," 1996 *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 26,2[Spring]: 511-22. Special thanks to Noah Montemarano for outstanding research assistance and to the many former staff members who made time for an interview in 2020. They include: Patrick Dillon, Eugene Kang, Ken Mehlman, Michael Schmuck, and Campbell Spencer.

<sup>1</sup> Bradley H. Patterson, Jr., *The Ring of Power*, New York: Basic Books, 1988: 229-30.

<sup>2</sup> "As the Most Loyal of Reagan's Loyalists, Nofziger will Retain a Political Role," *National Journal*, October 24, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Sidney M. Milkis, "The Presidency and Political Parties," in Michael Nelson, *The Presidency and the Political System*, (5th ed.), Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1998, p.380.

Richard Cheney all fulfilled this role.<sup>4</sup> It was not until 1978, amidst wide-ranging criticism,<sup>5</sup> when Jimmy Carter assigned Tim Kraft the position of assistant to the president for political affairs and personnel (though it was more vaguely referred to as “assistant to the president” in the *U.S. Government Manual*’s listing of White House staff). President Reagan appointed Lyn Nofziger as the first director of OPA (as verified by the *U.S. Government Manual*) in 1981.

The existence of a clearly identified office of political affairs within the Reagan White House can be regarded as something of a triumph for Nofziger’s viewpoint. While the functions -- handling patronage matters and political clearances and working closely with party officials and congressional campaign committees -- are not new, the establishment of an openly acknowledged focal point for them is.<sup>6</sup>

From then on, the OPA was an established unit within the White House, though it was briefly merged with Intergovernmental Affairs at the end of the Reagan administration. Despite its overtly political functions, it did not encounter significant controversy until the George W. Bush administration. In 2007, the Office of the Special Counsel received a complaint about Hatch Act<sup>7</sup> violations, launched an investigation and released a comprehensive report in 2011.<sup>8</sup> In 2008, House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chair, Henry Waxman (D-CA), also investigated the Bush OPA citing Hatch Act violations.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps in response to this investigation, the 2008 Republican presidential nominee, Senator John McCain, pledged to abolish the office.<sup>10</sup> President Obama did not make a similar pledge, retained the office in 2009, but closed it in 2011.<sup>11</sup> At that point, staff members largely left to work on the reelection campaign. The disbanding of the office may have also stemmed from the 2010 midterm elections results: a Republican takeover of the House of Representatives and a vigorous Chairman of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA). In 2014, the Obama team reconstituted the office under a new name, the Office of Political Strategy and Outreach, a smaller operation that shifted the focus to polling, communications and strategy.<sup>12</sup>

When President Trump was elected in 2016, the office reverted to the original title and remained largely under the radar throughout the first term. OPA received some criticism in fall of 2017 when the new chief of staff, John Kelly, was reviewing White House operations.<sup>13</sup> Criticism intensified after losses in two special elections (Senate race in Alabama in December of 2017 and House of Representatives seat in Pennsylvania, March 2018) in which both Republican candidates were endorsed by President Trump.<sup>14</sup> Roughly eight months after the Pennsylvania special election, the Republicans lost control of the House

<sup>4</sup> Note that this is just a partial list of the political operatives working for Presidents Johnson through Ford.

<sup>5</sup> President Jimmy Carter and his team were often criticized for lacking political sensitivity and not understanding how Washington works. Even Democratic House Speaker, Tip O’Neill, criticized the White House staff in his memoir, *Man of the House*. In a *New York Times* article, Hedrick Smith captured this sentiment, “The President himself, sensing the problem, joked about his poor relations with Capitol Hill. Someone, he said, advised him to treat Congress as he had treated the Georgia legislature. “It didn’t work,” he quipped. “They treated me like the Governor of Georgia.” See Hedrick Smith, “Problems of a Problem Solver,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/01/08/archives/problems-of-a-problem-solver.html>, accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> “As the Most Loyal of Reagan’s Loyalists, Nofziger will Retain a Political Role,” *National Journal*, October 24, 1981.

<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, violations of the Hatch Act occur when federal employees use government resources for political purposes. This CRS report provides a brief synopsis of the act. See <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/IF11512.pdf>, for a basic understanding of the Hatch Act, accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.eenews.net/assets/2020/06/22/document\\_gv\\_09.pdf](https://www.eenews.net/assets/2020/06/22/document_gv_09.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> See <http://web.archive.org/web/20081030220232/http://oversight.house.gov/story.asp?id=2222>, accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.politico.com/story/2008/11/obama-faces-test-on-wh-political-office-015574>, accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> For additional information about the closure, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/21/us/politics/21obama.html>, accessed October 20, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Former Obama OPA staff member, Bobby Schmuck, indicated that that the new version of OPA no longer had regional directors or labor outreach. Interview, August 14, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/15/kelly-looks-at-shaking-up-white-house-political-operation-242788>, accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> After Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) was confirmed as Attorney General, a special election was held in Alabama in December of 2017. President Trump put his support behind controversial candidate, Roy Moore, who narrowly lost to Democrat Doug Jones. Roughly three months later, Republican Tim Murphy (R-PA) resigned due to a sex scandal, setting up another special election between Democrat Conor Lamb and Republican Rick Saccone. Lamb narrowly beat Saccone, causing White House advisors to question the efficacy of OPA.

of Representatives in the midterm elections. Nevertheless, OPA director, Bill Stepien, kept his job and eventually became the campaign manager of the 2020 reelection campaign.<sup>15</sup>

## **MAIN TASKS OF THE OFFICE OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS**

Though the functions of this office can change from administration to administration, it is possible to highlight the primary activities. Being the president's "political eyes and ears" requires fulfilling at least five major tasks: outreach, electioneering, liaison to the party (national, state and local levels), task force/ad hoc activity and providing political intelligence. In a 2005 Miller Center oral history session with Joan Baggett, OPA deputy director at the start of the Clinton administration (promoted to director in June 1993), touched on three of these important tasks:

It was our responsibility to worry about anybody who had an election. We were sort of the entry point, which involved a lot of fund-raising, scheduling, quite frankly. We also had to be concerned about taking care of constituents. But, if there was a legislative issue, technically, legislative affairs does the lobbying and they would have been dealing with getting the votes. But almost every legislative issue we had was so tight that we had to be involved, public liaison had to be involved, everybody had to help do that lifting.<sup>16</sup>

The two functions she omitted were the OPA's role as gatherer of political intelligence and liaison to the party, which includes not just the national party organizations (Democratic National Committee and Republican National Committee), but the state and local party organizations as well as the campaign committees (e.g., Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Democratic Governors Association, National Republican Senatorial Committee, National Republican Congressional Committee, Republican Governors Association). Taken together, this office works at a breakneck pace and as much as they seek to plan, are often reacting to events and political developments.

### **OUTREACH**

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According to former OPA Director, Ron Kaufman, "The care and feeding of those people [George H.W. Bush supporters] was the major part of the Office of Political Affairs."<sup>17</sup> Whether it was providing a tour of the White House or entry to a presidential rally, the members of this staff assist constituents much like members of Congress do casework for citizens in their district. These efforts can range from obtaining presidential cuff links for a special donor (the national party organization pays for these gifts), scheduling a tour of the White House for constituents or sending an autographed photo to a supporter.

In addition, the OPA has provided political briefings designed to reward constituents and political appointees, and generally boost morale. High dollar donors or favored constituents could receive a special White House tour, photograph with the president and briefing by a senior staff member. During the George H.W. Bush administration, the director of OPA indicated he spent roughly 20 percent of his time working on these briefings.<sup>18</sup> In the 2011 report published by the Office of the Special Counsel (OSC), they identified approximately 75 political briefings given by Bush OPA employees to political appointees at 20 federal agencies between 2001 and 2007.<sup>19</sup> According to the OSC report, these briefings featured PowerPoint presentations that included slides to paint a picture of the political climate, the president's approval, congressional makeup and speculation about the forthcoming election. OPA's outreach efforts have been vigorous and tend to intensify around midterm and reelection years.

<sup>15</sup> Notably, there were no congressional investigations into the office during the Trump administration (the House of Representatives was under Republican control the first two years and Democratic control during the last two years). More than likely, the Mueller probe, impeachment trial and other larger issues consumed the attention of the Democratically-controlled House.

<sup>16</sup> <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/joan-n-baggett-oral-history>, accessed October 7, 2020, p.57.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Ron Kaufman, May 25, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Tenpas, 1996, *op cit.* p. 512.

<sup>19</sup> See chapter three, section two in the OSC report: [https://www.eenews.net/assets/2020/06/22/document\\_gw\\_09.pdf](https://www.eenews.net/assets/2020/06/22/document_gw_09.pdf)

## ELECTIONEERING

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Despite the fact that presidents typically lose seats in the midterm elections,<sup>20</sup> the president and his staff care deeply about their party's electoral performance. One Obama official framed it this way:

...we were very focused on the midterm election. We knew from the day we got in what the history of the first midterm is for a president. And you know we were up against it from the beginning and you know, how much worse that could be. So that was a very front and center responsibility for us every day.<sup>21</sup>

As this staff member suggests, the midterm results are often perceived to be the first major “report card” for the administration. There are at least three incentives that drive OPA's involvement in the midterms: to stem the bleeding and limit the midterm losses, to assist congressional campaigns of those incumbents who have been helpful advancing the president's legislative agenda, and to educate the staff on the nuances of the political landscape in advance of the reelection campaign.

Providing a telling illustration of the OPA's focus on key midterm elections, Karl Rove, who supervised OPA during the George W. Bush administration, indicated that they evaluated candidates and races to determine the Republican party's best prospects:

We went into it with eyes wide open. First of all, we would have to reduce primaries wherever we could, recruit the best candidate, reduce the likelihood of primaries, and then raise an ungodly amount of money for them, which meant that the president would have to commit himself to an extraordinary effort on behalf of these candidates... The object was to figure out where did we have a shot to win and who was the most likely candidate to get there, and then how could we use the prestige and allure of the White House in order to get us there. We had a very bright young speaker of the house in Minnesota who wanted to run for the Senate. We had the former Democratic mayor of St. Paul. It was clear that Norm Coleman [Jr.] had a better shot of winning this than did Tim Pawlenty. So I called up Pawlenty and said, “We just want to tell you that we're behind Norm Coleman and hope you'll run for Governor instead.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to stemming the midterm losses, part of the OPA strategy is to assist the elections of those members of Congress who either helped advance the president's legislative agenda or have the potential to be helpful.

In 2008, Henry Waxman (D-CA), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform committee, released a draft report exposing the George W. Bush administration's significant efforts in the 2006 midterms:

[The OPA] mounted an extensive coordination strategy by developing “target lists” of Republican candidates who were in tight races. These lists were then used to develop recommendations for travel by cabinet secretaries and other top officials to key districts. The OPA would then distribute weekly “Suggested Event” memos, according to the report, and “kept close tabs on whether agencies were fulfilling White House recommendations.”<sup>23</sup>

This excerpt demonstrates that even in a second term, the president's team works fervently, to cut losses in this important national election.<sup>24</sup>

The results of the midterm election provide a roadmap for the forthcoming reelection campaign, revealing areas of strength and weakness and shifting the OPA's focal point. The OPA is typically involved in the early stages of the president's reelection campaign by preparing a long-term strategy and recruiting campaign staff.<sup>25</sup> According to a former Reagan OPA director, “In the first two years, your major client

<sup>20</sup> Going back to President Kennedy, the victorious exceptions include just two House victories: Clinton 1998 and Bush 2002, and in the Senate only Presidents Kennedy, Nixon and George W. Bush picked up Senate seats. See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2018/10/09/historically-the-presidents-party-performs-poorly-in-the-midterms-infographic/#2c144c5f6732>, accessed October 20, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Patrick Dillon, July 28, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/karl-rove-oral-history-part-ii>

<sup>23</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/Politics/story?id=6040142&page=1>, accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> The report was denounced by Republicans as an attempt to make “political hay” out of widely accepted practices going back to Eisenhower. According to one news report: “The report also states that “even offices with statutory provisions prohibiting political activity” were enlisted in the OPA's efforts. The efforts were otherwise legal – but should not have been, according to the report. The committee advocated outlawing the White House Office of Political Affairs or restructuring it “to ensure that it serves the interests of the taxpayer, not the political party of the President.” Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, *Presidents as Candidates: Inside the White House for the Presidential Campaign*. NY: Garland Publishing, 1997, p. 33-38. Note that once the reelection campaign starts, there is typically a point person in the White House responsible for



is the party in Congress and the states. The last two years...your major client is the reelection campaign.”<sup>26</sup> The OPA constantly keeps their finger on the electoral pulse, monitoring key races across the country and mobilizing administration resources to benefit the president and his party.<sup>27</sup>

### LLAISON TO THE PARTY

When the party of the president holds the White House, the national party becomes a political annex of the White House, promoting the president and his policies, retiring campaign debt and subsidizing White House political expenses (e.g., travel to fundraisers, paying for polls, focus groups, holiday cards, presidential cuff links and other gifts for supporters).<sup>28</sup> According to Obama deputy director, Patrick Dillon,

We took ownership over the president’s role as the leader of the party and as a political campaign actor and all of the things that flowed underneath that, so liaising with the DNC, liaising with all the campaign party apparatuses...<sup>29</sup>

The director of the OPA will often hold weekly meetings with the national party chair.<sup>30</sup> OPA oversees this relationship and also works closely with state and local party organizations. Should the president visit Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Republican or Democratic party will play a role in hosting the event and the OPA makes sure that it is done so in a manner that is consonant with the president’s preferences. White House staff members create and nourish relationships with the party organizations across the country as they not only need their support, but they often provide important political intelligence.

This relationship has a reciprocal component to it as well: party organizations often call on OPA to ask for favors (e.g., photos, tours), information and political intelligence. The state and local party organizations, in particular, view the OPA as a direct connection to the president and enjoy the prestige it conveys.

### TASK FORCE/ AD HOC ACTIVITY

The OPA is also involved in generating grassroots support for legislation, Supreme Court nominations, disaster response or other high-profile presidential preferences. In a sense, the OPA chips in whenever needed by contributing their political intelligence, connections and organizational skills. One example of ad hoc activity that forced OPA into action was the British Petroleum oil spill in 2010. According to OPA staff member, Eugene Kang:

Part of the President’s response was to embed staffers pulled from across the agencies into each effected state to help coordinate with the state governments. This was a novel challenge because a “coordinated federal response” is much easier said than done. There is uneasy governance from a statutory perspective with that...i.e., how money and resources are allocated to each agency is very proscriptive. And the White House is the only office that has the statutory power to break down some of the silos so that federal resources are allocated in as efficient and responsible way as possible. Adding on to that, these on-the-state-coordinators had to be a part of a lot of conversations with their counterparts in each state across functions – we worked with other WH offices to help provide support to these coordinators.<sup>31</sup>

Given the deep political connections that staff members possess, they are capable of activating party organizations and supporters on short notice. It is this particular function that integrates OPA with many other White House offices (e.g., Communications, Legislative Affairs, Intergovernmental Affairs, Public Liaison). It is worth noting that OPA’s effort is not limited to domestic policy or crises. During the

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coordinating and communicating with campaign staff. Given the demands of the campaign, they need to balance the competing demands of official and political business.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Ron Kaufman, May 25, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> It is also worth noting that OPA is also involved in off-year gubernatorial races and special elections. See Footnote 14.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on how the party organization supports the president, see Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, “Promoting President Clinton’s Policy Agenda: DNC as Presidential Lobbyist,” *American Review of Politics*, V. 17, Fall/Winter 1996, pp.283-298.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Patrick Dillon, July 28, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Note that they might often meet with the senatorial and congressional campaign committees as well.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Eugene Kang, August 12, 2020.

George H.W. Bush administration, OPA was called on to promote Operation Desert Storm along with the Pentagon, National Security Council and other White House entities.<sup>32</sup> Though inherently unpredictable, the OPA stands by to assist the president on all manner of issues.

### PROVIDING POLITICAL INTELLIGENCE

One of the ongoing tasks of OPA is to cultivate sources of political intelligence across the country and to provide this information to other White House staff members, political appointees and allies. This intelligence gathering skill seems most important when planning a presidential trip, but is used in a wide variety of ways. At times, OPA is part of a larger group that helps determine where the president should visit, understanding that a president's time is the administration's most valuable asset. Admittedly, there is some travel that is non-discretionary (a disaster site or commemorative event), but when there is discretion, OPA staff will often weigh in with political concerns, special requests or interests. Once the location has been decided, OPA staff will research the political landscape and help identify whom the president should meet, and which supporters should be formally recognized. Campbell Spencer, former Obama OPA staff member, addressed the early days of the Obama administration in this capacity:

I got hired and immediately the president was going to Indiana which may have been his first trip, and Indiana was [in] my region. It was not entirely clear to me how we should structure the president's activities in the state. We were sort of told, "Alright let's plan the president's trip to Indiana" - I didn't know exactly what that meant. So I called Linda Forbes who was in the Clinton White House office for political affairs and asked "how did you all structure the presidents travel?" She told me how they did it, essentially that he would arrive and that they would do two clutches for his travel, to ensure that he was touching his political supporters. And so I took that back and that sort of became the model of how we did it.<sup>33</sup>

The political intelligence they have gathered enables them to compose political briefings that include an analysis of state and local politics and other outreach-related issues. The OPA conducts its own political research (though often uses polling data paid for by that national party organization), but the director is often pulled into meetings with other outreach offices like legislative affairs, intergovernmental affairs, public liaison and communications, which ultimately broadens the scope of political intelligence. In addition, their political knowledge is often tapped by speechwriters, those in the scheduling and advance office (to advise on travel destinations) and other trip-related meetings. One example from the Clinton administration:

The staff members who divided up the states put together notebooks on each state. They had the key people, any important campaign pledges that were made that applied to those states, and then they just obviously kept that updated as principals were traveling to the state. So, if any of the four principals—President, Vice President, or their spouses—went in, we'd do briefings for them.<sup>34</sup>

Taken together, fulfilling these five functions provide more than enough work for a small staff in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.<sup>35</sup> Those whom I interviewed repeatedly conveyed the overwhelming nature of the job—seven days a week, pressure to work quickly and long hours punctuated by occasional presidential travel.

## SIZE, KEY CONTACTS, ORGANIZATION

Over the course of six administrations, the size of the office has wavered from ten to fifteen staff members, all of whom have campaign or political organization experience. It is worth noting that in Republican administrations, the OPA director often becomes a senior reelection campaign staff member (e.g., Ed Rollins-Reagan 1984; David Carney- Bush 1992; Ken Mehlman – Bush II 2004; Bill Stepien –

<sup>32</sup> Tenpas, "Institutionalized Politics," p.514.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Campbell Spencer, August 7, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/joan-n-baggett-oral-history>, p.58, accessed October 14, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> The director of the OPA will often have an office in the West Wing, but the remainder of the staff is located in the EEOB.

Trump 2020). A deep understanding of presidential campaigns and the requisite relationships that requires appear to be the key characteristics of individuals working in the OPA. Most possess resumes that demonstrate substantial participation in national political causes (e.g., ballot initiatives), campaigns or related work on Capitol Hill. Former OPA staff members frequently described the pivotal importance of “relationships.” For example, if the president is going to visit Erie, Pennsylvania, it helps to contact key donors and alert party officials in that region with an eye toward maximizing the impact of the trip.

In terms of how the office operates within the White House, typically a designated staff member in the chief of staff’s office (the deputy chief of staff for operations during the Obama administration) has oversight over OPA and the office usually includes a director, deputy director, three special assistants with regional responsibilities, two generalists and three executive assistants. This office often has White House interns working there as well. (Given the turnover in the White House, particularly in advance of the reelection campaign, the size of the office is rarely constant.)

During some administrations, the director has the most senior commissioned title of “assistant to the president,” but more recently, the director had the title of “deputy assistant to the president,” while the deputy director has the commissioned title of “special assistant to the president.” In the case of the Trump administration, there was a puzzling approach: for the first three years and nine months, the director position was slotted as a “deputy assistant to the president,” but in October of 2020, the position was elevated to an “assistant to the president.”

The special assistants can vary in number, but typically possess a regional portfolio covering a specific area of the United States. These individuals are responsible for building and nurturing a relationship with the state and local party organizations, politicians, political consultants and pollsters.

OPA is involved with many other White House offices, particularly the other outreach offices like Legislative Affairs, Public Liaison<sup>36</sup> and Intergovernmental Affairs. There can also be periodic involvement with the White House Counsel’s office regarding the Hatch Act or the Staff Secretary’s office in preparation of a presidential briefing book. Former Clinton director of OPA, Joan Baggett, provides a useful example of the connectedness of OPA:

So, if a mayor was running for election, 90% of his business would get done through Intergovernmental. But if he wanted campaign-related stuff, he’d be dealing with us. The same with Legislative Affairs. They’d be dealing with him on legislation, but if they were doing fund-raising stuff, they’d be dealing with us. Or if they wanted a political appearance.<sup>37</sup>

## **DAILY SCHEDULE**

Many former staffers indicated that so much of their job was reacting to events, which made planning and routines an unattainable feat. Given the fast pace and the need to respond to external events, there was typically a senior staff meeting that the OPA director attended, followed by an OPA staff meeting on a regular basis. According to a podcast interview with President Obama’s former OPA Director, Patrick Gaspard would start each morning with a briefing from the press office. Then he would meet at 7am with the senior staff to discuss the administration’s proactive political messaging and reactive strategies (responses to media coverage and to specific political crises).<sup>38</sup> Other staff members recalled their days being punctuated by numerous meetings with offices like Scheduling and Advance, Intergovernmental Affairs, Public Liaison or participation in a “war room”-- a short-term, “task-force like” effort to focus on a specific piece of legislation, nominee or presidential priority. The director’s meeting schedule is likely to be a function of his or her relationship with the chief of staff and president and, as such, will vary within and across administrations.

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<sup>36</sup> This office was called the Office of Public Engagement during the Obama administration, but essentially filled the same role. The title reverted back to the Office of Public Liaison during the Trump administration.

<sup>37</sup> <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/joan-n-baggett-oral-history>, p. 64, accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Podcast: “[You Decide with Errol Louis: How a Job in NY Politics Led to a Job as Obama’s Political Director](#)”, around the 27 minute mark, accessed October 23, 2020.

## ADVICE: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T WORK

- Figure out how the president and chief of staff want to receive political intelligence and then adapt your approach to suit their needs. According to Ken Mehlman, Director of OPA at the start of the George W. Bush administration, “[The] most important piece of advice I would give would be 1) understand what the goal of the principal you’re working for is. Understand how they operate, how they use information and try to provide them with the services and the information to help them do their job. And 2) most importantly is understand and set very clear ethical rules and limits.”<sup>39</sup> Each president comes to the job with a certain skillset and some were clearly more politically savvy than others, thus altering the job of OPA director.
- For those staff members responsible for specific geographic regions in the country, emphasize the importance of building relationships and the benefits of getting to know your contacts at the state and local levels. Investing in relationships at the early stages was thought to be helpful throughout a staff member’s White House tenure and the sooner, the better. Several former staffers indicated that prior experience on the presidential campaign paid dividends in the early days of the administration. Rather than building new relationships, you were nurturing old ones and expanding your universe of contacts. For example, knowing political operatives in Boise, Idaho, improved and hastened your ability to prepare a trip report or fulfill a constituent request.
- Though most offices deem their work to be of primary importance, there is a case to be made for the early appointment of staff members to OPA. Given their critical role as an office that interfaces with key constituents and party organizations, it is important to hire staff early and assign specific tasks to them. Additionally, some of the members of this office will serve as the conduit to the national party organization, which requires its own workflow that require time to plan and execute. There are also a range of areas where coordination is needed from a practical and compliance perspective – one of these being the coordination of political travel with cabinet secretaries. During the Obama administration, they created a system to coordinate cabinet travel. Staff member, Eugene Kang, highlighted the importance:

We didn’t figure that out until pretty late. And then we had a woman named Anne Filipic, who had held senior roles on the campaign in 2008, who was one of our senior members of the Iowa team, who went from state to state and then to Chicago, she came to the DNC to be sort of the person to help manage those requests [and] that was our interface. But setting up those types of systems earlier is immensely valuable.<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It has become clear that the OPA walks an ethical tightrope, despite the fact that there have not been any recent congressional inquiries. The office is a soft target and is easily subject to accusations of overt politicization. Some Members of Congress<sup>41</sup> and political observers, like Brookings scholar, Stephen Hess, have suggested abolishing the office and allowing the national party organization to fulfill the various functions.<sup>42</sup> Of course, proximity is everything when it comes to advising the president. According to presidential scholar, James P. Pfiffner, “They want immediate response from people they trust implicitly, and they want the capacity available in the White House.”<sup>43</sup> Occupants of the oval office have been

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Ken Mehlman, August 18, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Eugene Kang, August 12, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Specifically, Congressman Henry Waxman (D-CA) and Senator John McCain (R-AZ) wanted the office abolished and expressed this sentiment in 2008. See <https://www.politico.com/story/2008/11/white-house-political-office-will-remain-015880>, accessed October 23, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Hess, *Organizing the Presidency*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1988), p.228.

<sup>43</sup> James P. Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), p.4.

reluctant to do away with an entity designed to improve their political standing. When the party of the president controls both houses of Congress, there may be less risk in the office's operation, but when there is a divided government, there will be far more scrutiny. Future presidents would be wise to adhere to strict ethical standards (i.e., avoiding Hatch Act violations) so as to avoid drawing negative attention to OPA, ultimately jeopardizing the president's ability to receive on-site political advice.

## APPENDIX

### DIRECTORS OF THE OFFICE OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS

It is worth noting that only five of 23 directors have been women, much like many other offices within the White House. For more information on the role of women in the White House, see Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-presidents-advisors-an-analysis-of-women-on-the-presidents-a-team/>.

#### *President Carter*

Tim Kraft (1978 - before the office was formally designated in the *U.S. Government Manual*)  
Sarah Weddington

#### *President Reagan*

Lyn Nofziger  
Ed Rollins  
Mitch Daniels – OPA merged with Intergovernmental Affairs for remainder of second term  
Frank Donatelli

#### *President Bush*

James Wray  
David Carney  
Ron Kaufman  
Janet Mullins

#### *President Clinton*

Rahm Emanuel  
Joan Baggett  
Doug Sosnick  
Craig Smith  
Minyon Moore

#### *President Bush*

Ken Mehlman  
Matt Schlapp  
Sara Taylor  
Jonathan Felts

#### *President Obama*

Patrick Gaspard (office disbanded in 2011)  
David Simas (office renamed Office of Political Strategy and Outreach) in 2014

#### *President Trump*

Bill Stepien  
Brian Jack