



**THE WHITE HOUSE
TRANSITION PROJECT**
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RICE UNIVERSITY'S
BAKER INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

SMOOTHING THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF DEMOCRATIC POWER

Report 2017—33

THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Martha Joynt Kumar, *Director, White House Transition Project*
Professor Emeritus, Tomson University

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WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO	II
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	V
<i>Lessons Learned</i>	<i>vi</i>
1. Don't Have the President Speak Unless He Has Something Specific to Say: 'Less Is More'	vi
2. Have People Around Who Are "Gray in the Temples"	vi
3. Talk to Your Predecessors and Others	vii
4. It Is Difficult to Make Use of Lessons Learned	viii
5. Don't Mix Information and Persuasion	viii
6. Presidents View Their Problems as Communications Problems, Though in Reality They Are Political Problems	ix
THE ENVIRONMENT WITHIN WHICH THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTIONS	3
1. <i>Successful Communications Is Linked to the Policy and Operational Aspects of a Presidency</i>	3
2. <i>Partisan Differences in Press and Communications Operations</i>	4
3. <i>Maturing Communications: Central Control, Integration, Coordination, and Planning</i>	6
4. <i>Communications Discussions Initiate the White House Work Day</i>	6
A POSITION DEFINED BY ITS RELATIONSHIPS	7
<i>The President</i>	7
<i>The Chief of Staff</i>	8
<i>The Press Secretary</i>	9
<i>Other White House Relationships</i>	10
A CALENDAR TO WORK WITH	10
<i>Congressional Session</i>	10
<i>State of the Union</i>	11
COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS REFLECT THE STRENGTHS AND STYLE OF A PRESIDENT	12
<i>Television Is Central to Communications Operations</i>	13
<i>Bringing Campaign Technology and Related Strategies into the White House</i>	17
<i>Offense and Defense in the Second Bush Administration: The Rapid Response Operation</i>	18
BACKGROUNDS OF DIRECTORS OF THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS	22
THE WORK OF THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR	26
<i>Three Models of Communications Directors: Advocate with the Press, Strategist and Planner, and Events Coordinator</i>	26
<i>The Responsibilities of the Communications Director</i>	28
<i>Strategic Communications: Message Development, Coordination, and Amplification</i>	28
Message Development	29
Message Coordination	30
Message Amplification	31
<i>Create and Administer Units Carrying Out Communications Functions</i>	32

AN IMPORTANT SUBUNIT: THE OFFICE OF MEDIA AFFAIRS	33
<i>The Importance of Media Affairs: A Washington Bypass</i>	33
<i>Media Affairs Staff Information: June 2000 and Winter 2016</i>	34
<i>Political Coordination and Planning</i>	35
The Reelection Campaign	35
The Legacy Campaign	36
<i>Planning and Staging Events</i>	36
Working the Press	38
Measuring Success	39
MESSAGE RESOURCES: VENUES AND PEOPLE	39
<i>Venues for Meeting Reporters</i>	39
<i>People</i>	40
The President	40
The Press Secretary	41
Senior Staff	42
Policymakers	42
Outside Resources	42
DAILY ROUTINES OF THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR	42
<i>Morning Meetings</i>	43
<i>Meetings Throughout the Day</i>	43
<i>Evenings of White House Work</i>	44
WORK LIFE IN THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS	44
<i>Physical Stress Involved in Working in a White House</i>	44
<i>On Call and in the Public Eye</i>	45
<i>The Responsibility Associated with White House Work</i>	46
<i>Time to Leave</i>	47
SUMMARY	47
INTERVIEWS CITED	48
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	49

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of Communications is a White House unit where function clearly preceded structure. For many years, press secretaries were expected to handle the daily function of providing information to reporters and their news organizations as well as respond to the increasing need to coordinate White House publicity objectives with the departments and do long-range presidential publicity. James Hagerty, President Eisenhower's press secretary, was able to handle both immediate and long-range presidential publicity needs. But it was soon clear that presidents needed to develop a planning operation that blended a president's goals and priorities with clear publicity plans of how to best explain his proposals. Shortly after he came into office in 1969, President Nixon created the Office of Communications as an operation that undertakes long-term planning, speechwriting, and research as well as handles contacts with out-of-town media and ethnic and specialty press.

Volatility surrounds the office in two ways. First, over the years, the office has performed the same functions, but its organizational home has varied between being a part of a Counselor's operation, serving as an independent office, or, less frequently, under the wing of the press secretary. There has been a significant variation in its internal units as well. At some points, the office includes what is usually the Public Liaison Office and, in most administrations, the Office of Communications has within it the Media Affairs unit, which is responsible for dealing with specialty press. Sometimes, however, Media Affairs is placed within the Press Office. Secondly, in addition to an unsettled structure, the communications director is in a difficult position because he or she is often held responsible for presidential

popularity dips. The tie-in to presidential approval and popularity ratings has resulted in a shorter tenure for communications directors than for most senior White House staff members.

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned in the Office of Communications are standard throughout a White House. The White House is an institution unlike any other people have experienced. The pace, the volume, and the high stakes in all you do make White House work both enlivening and concerning. It is an environment where you can't afford to make a mistake, but the likelihood is that you will. Learning the lessons from one's predecessors helps smooth the path of a staff member coming into the White House.

1. Don't Have the President Speak Unless He Has Something Specific to Say: 'Less Is More'

One of the most important presidential communications lessons is for the president to speak only when there is something specific to say. The reality is that people are listening less than they once did. One senior official in a recent administration pointed out that in presidential communications “‘less is more’ and [it is] better to have three amazing public engagements for the President than to have sixteen. Always have something to say.”¹ An example of an event going in an unwanted direction, an official in a recent administration said, is an August 28, 2014, press briefing President Obama had where reporters' post-conference focus was on the tan suit he wore. The official pointed out the session “wasn't terrible because he was wearing a tan suit. It was terrible because he had nothing to say. You know, he was talking about a quarter of a point revision in the GDP, something about Ukraine and something else.”²

Recent presidents and their staffs have followed the mantra of less is more. Presidents give fewer speeches today than they did in the Clinton and even George W. Bush era. Communications director Jen Psaki said of speeches in the Obama years: “Speeches are no longer as powerful a tool as they once were, and they're just not consistent with how people digest information today.”³ Comparing Presidents Clinton through Obama for seven and a half of their eight-year presidencies, the number of addresses and remarks has gone from 4,241 for Clinton, to 3,776 for George W. Bush, and to 3,290 for Obama. In part that is because people are not watching or listening to the network television evening news programs as they once did. In this century, people get their news in different places and ways than they did in earlier times. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and online streaming are important today as news venues.

2. Have People Around Who Are “Gray in the Temples”

In a White House, you need to be flexible and have people around who have a sense of the way the ground shifts around you. Don Baer spoke about the need to have in the operation people who have previously served in a White House:

¹ Background interview.

² Background interview.

³ Jen Psaki, interview by author, Washington, DC, September 9, 2016.

I just think you need people who are a little bit older, with more experience. But people who are older with more experience also just can't be people who are set in their ways. You've got to be—one of the things about White House life I think is true of any White House is, you've got to be enormously flexible and open to different ways of doing things and able and willing to go with the flow. Everything is going to change. The ground is going to shift completely out from under you. I'm for control, obviously. I'm for structures that help you to do that. But you've got to have a lot of play in those joints, and you have to be willing to just go with that and not let that frustrate you. There's a fine balance between saying "that's the way it shifted, let's just go with it," and, on the other hand, saying, "no, we said we were going to do it this way; let's do it this way. Let's try to make that new set of circumstances work in our context rather than completely shift our context to do those." It's hard to find the people who have both the experience and a little bit of gray in their temples who, at the same time, can be flexible and open enough to new circumstances to find the right ways to accommodate them.⁴

3. Talk to Your Predecessors and Others

Thomas Griscom spoke with his predecessors when he came into the White House as communications director in 1986. He came in with Senator Howard Baker, who was tapped for the post of chief of staff when President Reagan was in substantial political difficulty over the Iran–Contra issue. Griscom spoke with his predecessors as he came in and then maintained contact with a group of outside people who provided him with some perspective:

But the first thing we had to do—we were always suspect because we were not identified as true believers—was what were those defining points? I talked to Jody Powell, so you get the benefit of his perspective of the [Jimmy] Carter administration, what they had put in place. A person needs to understand that moment in time that you've got when you're occupying a certain office in a White House. You stop for a minute and reflect, "There have been many people who came before me and many people who will come after me. I've got an opportunity to maybe leave an imprint where somebody years from now will look at something that we did." But don't think you're inventing or creating the first snapshot of this. Many people have been here dealing with and thinking about these issues. If you're smart enough, you go back and you look at them. You basically sort through ideas and you update them in some cases. But it's important to learn. You need to be a good reader, a good listener, interested in history, reaching out and opening your mind and acknowledging, "This is a listening session. Here's what I'm trying to do. Help me."⁵

Once he came in, he established a practice of speaking with people outside of the White House. Griscom created a group he regularly spoke with for their perspective. "One of the things I did was have an informal group that I would talk to every week just to make sure you don't lose perspective," he said. "Some of them had been press secretaries. Some of them were reporters. Some of them were policy people. They were both Republicans and Democrats." He added:

I never put the whole group together. A lot of times because of the press of business, they were telephone conversations. Sometimes you could sneak away for a little bit during lunch and catch up. But they were not formal sessions; they were more informal give-and-take. They worked because it was all kept private. This was not trying to say, "Look who I can talk to" or somebody on the outside saying, "Well, they're asking my advice." I think that was important. It was really designed to understand what we're doing right; what we're doing wrong. That's how they always started. The first piece of advice most of them gave—and they were right—is, you will come in there with your breath taken away when you look at the magnitude of what you have to deal with. And you come in from the outside and you're not tainted by the White House, but within a short period of time you'll get

⁴ Don Baer, interview by author, Washington, DC, July 22, 1999.

⁵ Thomas Griscom, interview by author, May 3, 2006.

consumed. What you'll find is that your ability to carve out any time to think and look ahead will go away. Sure enough, that's what happened. You get so consumed by the day-to-day management that you stop and want to know where you are, how you are doing, and what you are missing.⁶

Thomas Griscom found his informal group to be a useful sounding board, capable of alerting him to how their actions were playing outside of the White House:

If I made a mistake here, I've got to find a place to try and correct it if I can. The monitoring is easy: Tell me what's going on politically? What are you hearing? What are our friends saying? What are our critics saying about us? Sometimes, believe it or not, the critics were not in the other party, they were with the same party. They were people with a more philosophical point of view. You needed information. What I would do, even if it was only for 15 minutes, was stop and think a little bit right there. Then you'd come back and deal with them. I had a lot of discussions, as you would expect, during Iran-Contra. There was advice given that you'd say, "Thank you but I just can't do that." But you wanted to hear what was on somebody's mind. But it didn't take away the fact that, in the final analysis, you're inside and they're not. You can get the best advice and you should do that. You should never isolate yourself. I also believe you should never isolate yourself politically because there are a lot of smart Republicans and smart Democrats out there. You can reach out and get information. But then you ultimately have to make the recommendation and live with the decision.⁷

4. It Is Difficult to Make Use of Lessons Learned

Once staff come into a White House, it is very difficult for them to apply the lessons they learn as they go along in their work. The pace of the work and the variety of the issues they work on make it difficult to stop, look back, and assess. A person who worked in the early Office of Communications in the early part of the Clinton White House explained:

Our people weren't stupid, so I think we had a sense in real time of what was working and what wasn't working, and why something wasn't working. The pace of our lives and the pace of the President's schedule didn't engender a lot of opportunities to have lessons learned sessions after the conclusion of events because, particularly in the first year, we were a proposal machine. And as the economic plan was coming to closure, we were already planning launch events for NAFTA, launch events for health care, and everything else you could possibly imagine. So there is insufficient time for reflection. I don't know of a manager who ran the White House who suggested for more than a fleeting moment that we pay attention to the lessons learned in a formal and systematic way from a previous experience that could be thoughtfully applied to one experience moving forward.⁸

5. Don't Mix Information and Persuasion

While the press secretary seeks to be distinguished by his objectivity and responsiveness in the handling of information, the communications director is a partisan who moves ideas and points of view. In the duality of persuasion and information, he represents using information for persuasion. In contrast, the press secretary deals with that duality in an opposite manner: he is primarily concerned with the authenticity of information and secondarily with persuasion. While he wants to present a case for the president and for his administration, in order to be effective he must do so in the context of the authenticity of information.

Mike McCurry talks about the difficulties of doing so. What that means to the Communications Office is significant, as it should be the shop doing the persuasion while

⁶ Griscom, interview.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Background interview.

the Press Office is the place for information. Both are necessary and should work together. Mike McCurry discussed the way in which the persuasion function has come into the Press Office. “Now there is a persuasion function that is located in the office, too, and that is the one I’m increasingly ambivalent about, is part of the job of that office to participate in the selling of the program. I think that’s where you drift over to spin, and you drift over to argumentation and opinion-based communicating. I think that’s a little more problematic. I’m not sure that’s a legitimate function of that office. I’ve even thought of going so far as to separating the political function out of that office entirely.”⁹

6. Presidents View Their Problems as Communications Problems, Though in Reality They Are Political Problems

When a president’s poll numbers take a dip, the assumption by the president and by the White House staff is that the president has a communications problem rather than an underlying political or policy problem. At the end of his administration, President Obama said that his problems were communications ones. “The mistake of my first term—couple of years—was thinking that this job was just about getting the policy right. And that’s important. But the nature of this office is also to tell a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose and optimism, especially during tough times,” he said.¹⁰ In reality, problems such as health care were much more than communications ones.

By the end of the Obama administration, there were twenty-nine directors of the Office of Communications and thirty press secretaries. On the surface these numbers indicate a similarity between the two, but the difference is greater. The first White House staff member appointed to handle a press portfolio was selected in 1929 while the Office of Communications came into being in 1969. The burn rate for communications directors is far higher than for press secretaries.

⁹ Michael McCurry, interview by author, Washington, DC, March 27, 2000.

¹⁰ David Nakamura, “Obama: Biggest Mistake Was Failing to ‘Tell a Story’ to American Public,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 2012.



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Communications is a total team effort in a sense because everything is about driving your agenda forward. A successful communications strategy is only one aspect of a successful presidency. You have to have a good solid sense of priority and where you're going and [your] mission, and everything is supportive of that. That involves good leadership from the Chief of Staff, good policy planning, good legislative relations on the Hill. It's all part of a seamless whole. That's what makes for a good presidency.

—Michael McCurry, press secretary to President Clinton¹¹

One of President Nixon's early actions in 1969 was to create the White House Office of Communications. The office was tasked with sending information to the out-of-town press and news organizations targeted toward particular audiences, and its director was responsible for dealing with editors and publishers as well as the associations representing them. While the Office of Communications was established in part as a perch for Herbert Klein, a longtime press associate of Richard Nixon and the widely respected former editor of *The San Diego Union*, the office fit in with President Nixon's interest in establishing a communications planning operation and a media contact organization for the nation's news outlets. Forty-eight years later, the office is even more important today than it was in its early years.

The Office of Communications is one of several institutions crucial to the startup of the White House because of the central place of effective communications in a successful presidency. Of the six presidents elected to a second term in the post-World War II period, all had an effective communications operation in addition to being a personally successful

¹¹ McCurry interview.

communicator. An effective communications organization provided them the opportunity to publicly display in terms of their choosing the issues they wanted to focus on, as well as to develop strategies designed to achieve the president's personal, policy, and electoral goals. The components of effective communications for Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama included personal attributes and a communications operation that incorporated daily press operations and an organization or, in the case of President Eisenhower, an individual—Press Secretary James Hagerty—capable of planning ahead for presidential and for administration-wide publicity. From Eisenhower's administration to the present, successful communication has evolved into a system in which organization plays a key role in strategic planning, with its mission the coordination of people, programs, and institutions. The Office of Communications is front-and-center in White House communications campaigns waged on behalf of a president and his programs. The coordination and production roles of the director of the office and of those who serve in it are central to successful White House publicity.

While the Office of Communications is vital to the communications of an effective presidency no matter who serves as chief executive, the position of communications director has proven to be a volatile one. In their paper "White House Communications Director: Presidential Fire-Walker," Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan observed that "when low poll numbers wounded President Clinton, the body that dropped was that of his Communications Director, George Stephanopoulos."¹² From its creation in 1969 to the end of the Obama administration, there have been twenty-nine directors of the Office of Communications, with David Gergen serving twice as director. That is approximately 19 months for each director. As the Obama administration came to a close, there have been thirty press secretaries—but that position has existed since 1929, forty years earlier than the Office of Communications. In the Clinton administration alone, there were five communications directors, plus two other senior aides tasked with communications functions, while in the same time period there were four chiefs of staff and four press secretaries. The casualty rate of communications directors reflects the difficult environment he or she operates in as well as the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands placed on the person.¹³ George Stephanopoulos observed that his being relieved of the communications position was not a surprise. "By definition, if the President isn't doing well, it's a communications problem. That's always going to be a natural place to make a change."¹⁴ The communications director is held responsible for how a president is doing with the public. That is true, even if the policies themselves are more likely the problem when a president's numbers are low than any communications strategies the communications director might devise. For that reason, the director's seat is the White House hot seat.

¹² Martha Joynt Kumar and Terry Sullivan, "The White House Communications Director: Presidential Fire-Walker," paper delivered to the Midwest Political Science Association, April 1996.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ George Stephanopoulos, interview by author, Washington, DC, September 1995.

THE ENVIRONMENT WITHIN WHICH THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTIONS

The important place of presidential communications can be seen in the way the topic drives the agenda of daily staff meetings, the size of the commitment to it by White House and administration resources and people, and the way the function has insinuated itself into the operations of almost every White House office. From their earliest daily meetings in the White House, staff begin with presidential communications as the central item on their plate. An administration adopts both an offensive and a defensive posture while communicating the president's vision, programs, and policies. Staff respond to information found in the media and, at the other end of the spectrum, plan to influence what news organizations print and air about the president and his policies and actions. To bring about the desired publicity, the White House staff works in organized settings where the coordination of people and programs is the central focus. The Office of Communications is the primary unit within the White House responsible for that coordination, as well as for developing strategies to implement the publicity for programs, and then for managing the events showcasing presidential initiatives.

1. SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATIONS IS LINKED TO THE POLICY AND OPERATIONAL ASPECTS OF A PRESIDENCY

Presidential communications relate directly to what a president does in office and how effectively the White House can use its organizational resources to publicize its goals and achievements. "A successful communications strategy is only one aspect of a successful presidency," Mike McCurry observed. "You have to have a good solid sense of priority and where you're going and [your] mission, and everything is supportive of that. That involves good leadership from the Chief of Staff, good policy planning, good legislative relations on the Hill. It's all part of a seamless whole. That's what makes for a good presidency."¹⁵

Communication strategies and the staff developing them aim at building a perception among people that the policies of an administration have altered lives in a positive manner. Ann Lewis, communications director under President Clinton, discussed the effectiveness of the Clinton communications operation in creating among the public a sense of how the Clinton policies was making a difference in their lives:

I think we've been particularly effective in getting across a commitment to making a difference in people's day-to-day lives. People believe that; they know that, that we care about them . . . I think we've been less effective in getting across the scope of this administration's achievements, which are, I believe, transforming in nature. It's not just from a deficit to a surplus, the highest home ownership in history, and the lowest unemployment in history, but the number of ways we're making sure that every kid can get the first two years of community college; that education is going to be more available; that health care is more available. In an ironic way, we've done so much that's a very large piece out there. Now I do believe we've seen consumer confidence go up; we've seen people's confidence in their own economic future go up but there's not a lot of interest in talking about achievement overall. You always want to talk about what your agenda is, how are you moving forward. Now you can build it in and say we can do this because look at what we've already done. But I think we still have work to do when you talk about the scope of what's been achieved.¹⁶

¹⁵ McCurry interview.

¹⁶ Ann Lewis, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Washington, DC, June 17, 1999.

Communications operations intersect with policy decisions at two levels, according to Don Baer, who handled communications strategy during the Clinton administration.

There were two levels of policy or two kinds of policy. One was what you might call the large, macro-policy decision-making, idea generation and decision-making. Do you or don't you come out for a balanced budget in the late spring of 1995? How do you fight the Republican budget situation? What position do you take vis-à-vis Medicare in the fall of the 1995? How do you package—and this is policy and communications—your approach on Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment going into that battle? Those are sort of the big, big decisions. Then there were sort of more specific things. Some of those have been derided a lot over time as kind of micro-policies. I never, frankly, saw them that way. I saw every one of them as essential tools and ideas that were designed to help the American people help themselves in any number of areas, whether it was education or fighting crime or raising their children, sending their kids to college. Those were all very important tools and, frankly, I think the enduring popularity of the Clinton presidency is as much about stepping up to and helping people have those kinds of things as it is about a good economy that also this administration has helped to dispel.¹⁷

2. PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN PRESS AND COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS

While White House staff of both parties seek good coverage of their presidents, they work toward their goal in ways that reflect established partisan patterns. When looking at the distribution of their resources for press and communications operations, Republicans and Democrats tend to strike a different balance as they start up their White Houses. Republicans think of the press in terms of communications while Democrats see communications through a focus on the press. Republicans develop communications strategies and consider where the press fits into them. For their part, Democrats come into a White House thinking in terms of assigning their resources to handling the press. Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to think in terms of their relations with reporters and news organizations as a way of getting good publicity. While Republicans also want good publicity, they come at it from the vantage point of a centrally controlled message operation. The Republican front-line team tends to be housed in the communications operation, however it is structured. Whatever their title, Republican senior staff specializing in communications are housed close to the president, near the top of the hierarchy.

President Reagan had a state-of-the-art communications operation reflecting the priority Republicans place on planning several months out. Michael Deaver led the operation from his position as deputy chief of staff. He described their planning operation, which lay at the heart of their effectiveness. “You have to [plan] because you're judged every day on what kind of job you're doing. When I set up the Blair House Group, it was probably the smartest thing I did,” said Deaver.¹⁸ The group met across the street from the White House in the Blair House, where the members would have less interference from staff and events of the moment.

It was [Richard] Darman [staff secretary] and [Craig] Fuller [chief of staff for Vice President Bush] and the scheduling guy, Fred Ryan and [Ken] Duberstein [Legislative Affairs], I think. We met uninterrupted for about three hours every Friday afternoon at the Blair House. We would take the three-month schedule and we would plan every day for three months. Then we'd take it for the next

¹⁷ Baer interview.

¹⁸ Michael Deaver, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Washington, DC, September 9, 1999.

two weeks and we'd plan every hour. Then I'd take it back and give it to [James] Baker to be sure he was okay with it. Then I'd give it to Reagan and be sure he was okay with it.¹⁹

Their strategic approach brought them some certainty in how they were covered by news organizations. Their interest in news organizations was in terms of their overall strategic plan.

During the early part of the Clinton administration, the communications director did the press work and served as the primary spokesperson for the president and his administration. The emphasis of the job was on its press work components. Don Baer, who held the post during the Clinton reelection campaign in 1995 and 1996, observed that communications in the early Clinton years was about press relations:

Everybody, whether they were called Communications Director or Press Secretary, basically thought their job was to be Press Secretary and not to really be a Communications Director in any sense of laying down strategy, helping the various output arms of the public face of the White House to know what their role would be in the context of the larger strategy for public communications. I think there was some dissatisfaction about that fact; that in fact what most people spent their time doing was the care and feeding of the press rather than thinking about the strategic communications objectives of the White House and how best to push those out. So there was a desire to reorient that role somewhat more in the other direction. Erskine Bowles, I think, played a big part because he had just come in as Deputy Chief of Staff with communications or strategic communications—whatever it was called—and Scheduling and Advance and a few other things like that under him. The whole purpose and idea was to try to get those units coordinating better because all of those are very important bits and pieces of what the larger strategic objectives of the White House would be.²⁰

In the Carter administration, the president focused almost totally on communications as an aspect of press operations, which meant communications was under the wing of Jody Powell, press secretary to President Carter. Gerald Rafshoon, the only staff person to hold the title in the Carter years, served as communications director for only a relatively short period during the administration. Even then, he found long-range planning to be a problem. “The point is even when I came in, we used to talk about long-range communications and long-range was [next week]. Next week is long-range in the White House because every time I would say ‘I’m going to stay in my office today and just write a communications plan for SALT [Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty] or Middle East peace’ and all that stuff, something would happen. You can’t just close your ears to it. I think I was probably the wrong person for that job because I was too close to the President so that I could not stay out of things that should have been done by his personal political [staff].”²¹

The two parties come to their different emphases because of the base of people they draw on for White House work and through the nature of their electoral coalitions. Michael McCurry commented on the differences in the two approaches:

In the Democratic Party because the pedigree is labor organizer, environmental activist, feminist, anti-war activist, some type of organizational being that believes that you have to speak truth to power [the culture is] the press ought to naturally be your ally. That’s kind of the assumption of a Democrat, that the press ought to be on your side after all. The Republican Party is exactly the opposite because their political culture is advertising, mass communications, the press is there to be handled and to be cordoned off and to be force-fed your message and you can never really view them as your friend.²²

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Baer interview.

²¹ Gerald Rafshoon, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Washington, DC, December 29, 1999.

²² McCurry interview.

When people from these different coalitions come into a White House, they take on the coloration of their previous experiences and relationships.

3. MATURING COMMUNICATIONS: CENTRAL CONTROL, INTEGRATION, COORDINATION, AND PLANNING

As communications operations have become more central to a presidency, White House staff of both parties have become more alike in how they handle communications. Mike McCurry refers to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "Iron Law of Emulation" when speaking of the manner in which people in the two parties have adapted their communications operations according to successful practices. Interested in controlling a message themselves, Democrats have adopted some of the same communications patterns as the Republicans.

That's really the kind of theory of how you communicate message. It really was distinctly different in the 1970s and 1980s because of the underlying differences in the political culture of the two parties, I think. Now, over time—Moynihan's great essay the "Iron Law of Emulation"—organizations in conflict become like one another. I think we've just adopted a lot of the Republican techniques of mass communication in the Democratic Party.²³

The techniques used by Republicans and Democrats alike in the latter part of their first term and in their second term focus on the process for controlling communications. The following characteristics are fairly consistently observed by those administrations known for their successful operations: central control, integration of policy, politics, and publicity, discipline, limited access, and planning ahead for events showcasing the president's themes and initiatives.

4. COMMUNICATIONS DISCUSSIONS INITIATE THE WHITE HOUSE WORK DAY

Communications is central to the modern presidency, and its position is reflected in what White House senior staff members do every day. That is true for Republicans and Democrats alike. In the Reagan and Bush administrations, the day began with communications as an important item on the agenda. In his days in the Reagan and Bush White Houses, for example, Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater wrote a memo for senior staff that served as an indicator to them of the press issues for the day. "My role at the staff meeting would be always the same: 'Marlin, what do we have to deal with today?' Everybody's got my memo around the table. 'These are the issues. If any of you want to add anything to any of these or give me any advice, come do it as soon as possible because I'm going to have to come up with answers.'" In the period from President Nixon forward, communications was featured as an important factor in how the day began.

For Democrats as well, press coverage of their administrations and how they should respond to news stories drives a day. The early-morning meeting convened by Chief of Staff Leon Panetta was fairly consistent in its subject matter to similar sessions held in Republican White Houses. Panetta described his early-morning meeting with core White House staff, dubbed the "Managers Meeting." Its members included the National Security Adviser, National Economic Council director, the press secretary, the vice president's chief of staff,

²³ Ibid.

the first lady's chief of staff, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, and the communications director.

The first thing was to ask [Mike] McCurry and George Stephanopoulos what's playing in the news that day, what's happening that day, what do they think are the big issues. Then I've got a foreign policy report from the National Security Adviser and got a sense of what the hot spots were. Then my legislative person in the White House talked about what was happening with the Congress, what's happening in the House, what's happening in the Senate, what's happening with regard to particular issues that are up there. In the course of that discussion you can make decisions about we've got a key issue up there, are you talking with the leadership, are you talking with these key members of Congress; do this, do that; maybe we have to have a meeting after this to talk about a particular issue.²⁴

As the staff discussed issues, they made decisions on what would be done during the day and who would be involved. Communications decisions were among them.

But you're making decisions as you go through it as to what are the areas where there are potential crises that you want to deal with and potential strategies that have to be laid out. We talked about economic policy after that and then usually had—by the way, even before that, usually at the top I went through the President's schedule for that day as to what we were looking at for the President's schedule. Again, some decisions might have to be made regarding the schedule as to these different places . . . For example, something happens. What's the best place to stage that for the President, the Rose Garden? Is it the press room? Is it to wait until the press goes in on an event and expect the question to be asked there? Those kinds of decisions don't have to go to the President of the United States. They're staging issues that you can make decisions on . . . So I would do that kind of staff meeting and you had a pretty good sense then of what that day was going to look like both from the President's perspective as well as the White House overall, what would be the key issues that you had to work with.²⁵

A POSITION DEFINED BY ITS RELATIONSHIPS

While the press secretary is an official whose work is defined by the expectations of news organizations and the precedents of those who preceded him in the post, the communications director is an official whose position is defined by relationships with officials inside the White House and political people outside of the building. His or her work is defined by those he or she serves. While the same is true in a general sense of the press secretary, the press secretary serves the same three constituents—the president, the press, and White House staff—no matter who is president or who is doing the reporting. The communications director has constituents inside and outside of the White House building.

THE PRESIDENT

The most important relationships for the communications director are those with the president and with the chief of staff. Michael Deaver said his work was defined by his relationships with the president and first lady. “And I really sort of gained whatever control or power I had simply by my relationship. But I overlapped with a lot of Baker,” Deaver said. “Baker basically gave me free rein. I spent most of my time on schedule and travel and the military office and all of the East Wing, which included the First Lady and the military.

²⁴ Leon Panetta, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Then [I] had sort of an ad hoc seat on anything dealing with communications. When Gergen left, I took over officially the communications role.”²⁶

For David Demarest, who served as communications director for President George H.W. Bush, communications had a smaller scope than was true of the role played by Michael Deaver in the Reagan administration. Demarest described the role President Bush wanted him to assume as his communications director: “I think the President saw me more as the guy that ran his speeches and his events. I don’t think he saw that in terms of a communications message. I think that he saw the press as the vehicle for the communications message through Marlin and through his own interactions with the press.”²⁷ For Demarest, the job focused more on administrative work than developing communications strategies for the president. When the president decided he wanted Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater to handle communications as well as his press relations, Fitzwater did so for a short period of time in spite of his misgivings about combining the two jobs. Fitzwater commented on the advice he gave to a Clinton aide when they came into the White House. He spoke about the Clinton team’s plan to cut off media access to the Upper Press Office (the area where the press secretary and his close aides are located) and on their desire to combine the press and communications posts: “I tried to explain in some detail why I thought that was a terrible idea, not only cutting them off but why they couldn’t combine the two jobs. I had just gone through that. I had been forced to take the communications job over my objections and finally just got out of it six, eight months later because it was a total failure.”²⁸ Fitzwater discovered what Jody Powell had learned before him: the daily operation consumes so much of your time and energy that there is none of either left to perform the responsibilities of the communications director.

THE CHIEF OF STAFF

The chief of staff is a key White House figure in communications. Effective communications come through coordination of people and offices with the integration of policy and political information. That process must be led out of the office of the chief of staff. Either the chief does such coordination himself, as Leon Panetta and James Baker did, or it is done by deputies. When Erskine Bowles was chief of staff, for example, his deputy, John Podesta, took charge of communications and, following the senior staff meeting, held a meeting each morning devoted to publicity issues.

The chief of staff can come into the communications process as an on-camera or background presence. When James Baker was chief of staff, he spent a great deal of time explaining administration policy to reporters on a background basis. In an interview for this project, Baker read through his notes containing the advice given to him by his predecessors when he met with them before he came into the Reagan White House. Press briefings figured high on the list.

Be an honest broker. Don’t use the process to impose your policy views on the President. He needs you to be an honest broker. You are the second-most powerful person in government. You have tremendous opportunities to impose your views; don’t do that. That’s not the role of the Chief of Staff. Talk to the press a lot; stay in touch with the press. Always do it on background. Just remember,

²⁶ Deaver interview.

²⁷ David Demarest, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Washington, DC, September 9, 1999.

²⁸ Marlin Fitzwater, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Deale, MD, October 21, 1999.

you weren't elected to anything, and people don't want to read your name in the paper. But it's important for you to keep the press informed about what it is you're trying to do, and continually spend time with them.²⁹

While James Baker spent a great deal of time with reporters doing background interviews, his successor could not understand why he did so. "When [Don] Regan replaced me as Chief of Staff, he said, 'I'm just amazed at the amount of time Jim Baker spent with the press.' Some people equated that with leaking. That's not leaking; that's spinning, which is what the Chief of Staff ought to be doing on background. Not up front, because the Chief of Staff is not elected," Baker related.³⁰

Today, the chief of staff is expected to be a regular presence on the Sunday television talk programs and sometimes on the morning shows as well. Beginning with Leon Panetta, who was very used to appearing on such programs when he was chairman of the House Budget Committee, the chief of staff became a television presence explaining administration policies. Erskine Bowles eschewed such appearances when he was chief of staff, but John Podesta observed the Panetta model. In the early days of the George W. Bush administration, Chief of Staff Andrew Card followed the Panetta-Podesta model.

Some chiefs of staff refuse altogether to get involved in communications or, alternately, have others do it for them. David Demarest described the difficulties President George H.W. Bush's senior staff had in dealing with outside groups and institutions. Their problem was Chief of Staff John Sununu, who did not want anyone other than himself to do legislative strategy or communications coordination. In this instance, the chief of staff represented a block to coordination, not a facilitator of it.

Fred [McClure] was about to set up a legislative strategy group, not a crazy idea, so that he would be able to pull all the elements together so that when President Bush wanted to move forward on some initiative we had a legislative strategy. Sununu said "no, I'm legislative strategy." When I wanted to set up a communications strategy group, [Sununu said] "no, I'm communications." And so we all kind of maneuvered around that. I set up a weekly events meeting and, lo and behold, communications issues got raised at those weekly events meeting. But I pitched it as this is simply to go over the next week's events, make sure that everybody from around the agencies and from within the White House knows what's going on. So it was both informational to people and it turned up a bunch of missing elements each week of what needed to happen. There'd be somebody from Advance there and there'd be somebody from policy and somebody from the cabinet agencies, whatever. I made it kind of open to all.³¹

THE PRESS SECRETARY

The responsibilities of the communications director are considered in light of those exercised by the press secretary. In two instances, the press secretary has taken over the communications function and exercised the responsibilities of both. In the Carter White House, for example, the only time there was a communications director was when Gerald Rafshoon was on the staff around the time leading up to the 1976 election. Press Secretary Jody Powell was otherwise expected to take the lead in the entire publicity area. Marlin Fitzwater took over the communications job for a period of a few months, which he had fought doing. Thus, of the thirty people who have served as press secretary, only two have exercised the communications function. On the other hand, there is one instance when the

²⁹ James A. Baker III, interview by author and Terry Sullivan, White House Interview Program, July 7, 1999.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Demarest interview.

press secretary reported to communications. That configuration was the case when President Clinton's first press secretary, Dee Dee Myers, reported to Communications Director George Stephanopoulos. Most often, though, the relationship between the two officials is one of close contact over issues of mutual interest and responsibility, but no organizational connection where one reports to the other. The functions of the two offices are separate from one another; when they mix, the audiences for both can be confused about what is persuasion and what is information.

OTHER WHITE HOUSE RELATIONSHIPS

The communications director regularly works with other White House offices, agencies, and departments as they set up events that also impact the partners to the events. In an instance of White House–agency coordination, Don Baer worked with Intergovernmental Affairs on setting up an event associated with a presidential appearance at the National Governors Association. “Intergovernmental Affairs knows that the National Governors Association is meeting,” he began. “That would be kind of their thing to coordinate, but they’d want to get it on the President’s schedule. What, then, does the President want to do when he’s at the NGA? What does he want to say to the NGA? It’s a big, high-profile event opportunity. So you’d have to have a lot of work and negotiation with them over what the governors were willing to hear from him versus what we wanted to do and say there, all those kinds of things. It was complicated.”³²

A CALENDAR TO WORK WITH

There are rhythms to the year, the month, a week, and to an administration. Knowing what events take place on the policy side in Washington, a president can plan out some of the opportunities he has during the year to focus on his issues in a manner of his choosing. The presidential calendar, he and his staff soon find out, is primarily composed of fixed events, most especially those associated with the congressional schedule. Two of the most important fixed events are the congressional schedule and the budget deadlines. Those are important for the pace of policy initiatives as well as for the consideration of appointments. The State of the Union message is held at the end of January, and the first part of the congressional session runs from early January to the Easter recess. In the spring, commencement addresses offer an opportunity to set themes for defense and other issues of the president’s choosing, such as technology and foreign policy. Clinton used them for these areas. Foreign policy comes to the forefront with the G-7 economic conference and with the APAC conference on Asian economic issues, and in September with the opening of the session of the United Nations. In the fall Congress again comes to the forefront with negotiations over the budget and bargaining on policies now in the committee and floor stages of consideration.

CONGRESSIONAL SESSION

The congressional session makes a great deal of difference to the way the White House functions and the shape of its agenda. Communications Director Ann Lewis commented on

³² Baer interview.

the link between the White House agenda and the congressional calendar: “When Congress is in and you’re close to the legislative session, you’re working on budget and legislation and that’s going to drive your day. Earlier in the year you have more freedom to sort of initiate and set the agenda. You try to get out most of the issues you want to make the case for early if you can.” Lewis believes the congressional calendar, more than any other, is the cycle influencing White House actions. “I think we are sort of like the moon and the tides in that way,” she said. “At the beginning of the year we spend our time laying out our agenda, and you know that by the fall we will be in the season where there will be action on it. In between we try, whenever possible, to call attention to the agenda and to get interest in it and action on it. As I say, the closer you get to October, November, you’re going to see more action. I’d say . . . that’s the season that means the most to me. I think that while we try to lay out broad themes in the commencement addresses, my sense is they don’t significantly impact beyond the day they’re given, most of the time. So I wouldn’t rate them as high in terms of the seasons of the year. Foreign policy and foreign trips now are likely to take place any time of year.”³³

STATE OF THE UNION

Each year the calendar provides the administration with an opportunity to present its policy priorities and to do so in a setting that commands substantial public attention. The State of the Union message is the most important regularly scheduled speech of the year. It brings together policy, politics, and publicity to focus on the president’s policy agenda and how the administration will get it through. Presidential aide Sidney Blumenthal explained the place of the State of the Union address in the second term of the Clinton administration:

That’s what the State of the Union is. That’s the basic document. And people should appreciate how the State of the Union is produced because that is not simply a speech. It is the outcome of the participation of every department and agency filtered through the White House staff in which there is intense jockeying and bargaining and lobbying over policy, and decisions are taken, ultimately, by the President. It is how the program is developed and consolidated through the process that leads to that speech. That is the most extensive process in the Executive Branch, the State of the Union.³⁴

The Clinton administration added to the importance of the speech by orchestrating a series of events that began once the Congress left town and the president’s congressional opponents fanned out to their hometowns across the country. Left with approximately six weeks without congressional opposition, the Clinton team showcased the ideas placed in their State of the Union message in the weeks leading up to it. They left a couple of items to be announced in the speech itself, but for the other policy proposals there were stories focusing on the particulars of what the president would offer in the address and surrogates in the administration who elaborated on the need for his initiatives.

³³ Ann Lewis, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Washington, DC, July 9, 1999.

³⁴ Sidney Blumenthal, interview by author, October 12, 1999.

COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS REFLECT THE STRENGTHS AND STYLE OF A PRESIDENT

Those presidents who are comfortable with communications create an organizational structure to match. Those who believe they are not particularly good at communicating their ideas eschew such operations: Rather than use communications operations to fill in what may be an important gap for them, they do the opposite and avoid creating or using them to advantage. The most sophisticated communications operations in recent years were those of the Reagan and Clinton administrations. Both presidents were comfortable with the notion of using key White House resources on their communications efforts. Both presidents committed a great deal of time to thinking through their communications and put in key places at the senior level those whose interests were compatible with their own. Those presidents who were not comfortable with committing such resources were chief executives who did not believe in the value of such efforts. President Carter did not have such an operation, except for a relatively short period, and President George H.W. Bush did not commit time to it. He preferred thinking about presidential publicity in terms of press operations and directed his attention to the work of the Press Office.

Presidents set a tone for their communications and adopt a style comfortable for them. Michael Deaver said Reagan would not do anything he was not comfortable with, as it would not come across well with the public. “He talked to me more about [communications] when I would try to get him to do things he didn’t want to do. For instance, when he first became governor, NBC was going to come out and do ‘A Day in the Life of Governor Reagan,’” explained Deaver:

This is pretty big to me. He was governor of a state and we were going to get a whole thing on the NBC News, which in 1967 NBC News was 40 million people a night or something. So I spent days on scripting this thing and I had a huge, big fold-out that I took into his office and spread on his desk. I started off by saying “You’ll take your jacket off and sling it over your shoulder and do sort of a pensive walk through the Capitol grounds.” He looked at me and said, “I can’t do that.” I said, “What do you mean you can’t do it? It’s very Kennedyesque.” He said, “That may be but I can’t do that.” I said, “Why not?” He said, “Let me tell you. I would be very uncomfortable. If I’m uncomfortable doing it, people are going to be very uncomfortable watching. So don’t ever ask me to do something that I’m uncomfortable with because it won’t work.” That was a great lesson.³⁵

By the time they reached the White House, Deaver understood how President Reagan viewed communications and what was appropriate for him to do:

I never had to talk to him about those things anymore. I understood instantly what he was talking about. I never did anything ever again that I thought was out of character for him because it wouldn’t work. But we would have arguments about press availabilities, press conferences, whether we should do them or not. It was never based on “I don’t want to take questions; I don’t want to do that.” It was based more on “I don’t think the timing is right.”³⁶

President Reagan liked radio and believed that people would not tire of it. He had a good sense of timing and did not want to go before the public very often, but he knew radio would not have the same impact. “He had a great belief and sense about timing. He thought you ought to be seen less than more, that the people would tire,” Deaver said. “I knew I had a great ally in him because he loved radio. He loved radio because he would not be seen. He

³⁵ Deaver interview.

³⁶ Ibid.

believed you could do a lot of things on the radio that wouldn't tire people that, if you did it on television, it would." Radio proved to be a good fit for President Reagan and for President Clinton as well. Both used it to lay out individual themes and to reach out to communities outside of the Washington environs. In addition, their statements and issues highlighted on Saturday often became the centerpiece of the agendas of the Sunday television talk shows and items in the "A Section" of the Sunday regional and local newspapers.

TELEVISION IS CENTRAL TO COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS

Other than the Press Office, there is no place in the White House where television is so central to the duties of an office. In an era where people demonstrate little interest in national politics, the first order of business is to get their attention. Ann Lewis discussed where television comes into their events. "What you've got to do every day proactively is figure out how do you talk to people about what you're doing and why," she said.

If what democracy says is based on the principle that people in their wisdom will make the right decision, that's based on how much information they have. So every day our responsibility is to give them information of what policies we're working on and why they should care. If we don't do it, it won't happen. Left to itself, the political system talks to itself. So my goal is every day, how do I reach that audience. What do we know about them? They're busy. They've got a lot going on in their lives. They've got two jobs, two kids, two cars; they're worried about Johnny's in school and [inaudible]. We are never going to be as important to them as they are to us. We've got to reach them wherever they are and whatever else they're doing. My second point is how do they get their news: most of them get it from television and they get it while they're doing something else. They're not sitting there taking notes. They're making dinner, eating dinner, talking to one another. So we're going to get, if we're lucky, a minute on the evening news. Everything about that minute ought to emphasize and re-emphasize the same message. That's why what the sign says, what the audience says, what the setting says, all of that is part of what they grasp as well as the words. So it's about talking to people on television about what we care about.³⁷

The White House does not leave to chance the images people receive about what the president is doing and the interpretation of their events. In the Clinton White House, the Communications Office developed signs to accompany each of the events they staged. By using a sign in the event to highlight the theme, the White House is less dependent upon the television network correspondents for stating the message in their remarks accompanying the video.

We give you the opening paragraph, we give you the closing story, and we even give you the headline. That signage is our headline. But it's all because we're talking to an audience where we're in heavy competition for their attention and we need to use every possible means to break through . . . Newspapers are where insiders and people who really care about issues read about them in depth. Insiders include members of Congress and policymakers, so they're very important. And they're also where a lot of television stories come from. So I'm not knocking newspaper stories, but they reach a smaller audience, especially the stories that are covered on A-17. While that's important and I want it to be accurate and I want it to be full, it's second choice for how we reach the voters we want, the people we're trying to reach.³⁸

The public learns what is happening in the political system through television news, but getting to people means grabbing their attention while they are paying only limited attention

³⁷ Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

³⁸ Ibid.

to their television. That is a daily challenge the White House faces. The communications director is tasked with figuring out how to break through to the public with the president's messages.

The staff of the George W. Bush White House focused on controlling those aspects of presidential communications that were possible to manage successfully.³⁹ How the president is portrayed in pictures is an area in which the White House has both an ability to control what is released and an interest in doing so. Communications staff members think through how to explain what the president is doing, right down to the pictures they want to see on television. As in earlier administrations, especially those of Presidents Reagan and Clinton, communications staffers in the George W. Bush White House invested heavily in producing memorable pictures. Because presidential appearances are now covered live from beginning to end on cable television, every detail of such events can affect their effectiveness at conveying messages.

Karl Rove traces the high point of media sophistication in this regard to the Reagan administration: "I think in the post-1980 era, we all owe it to [Michael] Deaver, who said, 'Turn off the sound of the television, and that's how people are going to decide whether you won the day or lost the day: the quality of the picture.'" He explains, "That's what they're going to get the message by, with the sound entirely off. And I think that's simplistic, but I think it's an important insight. There is a reason why that old saw, 'a picture is worth a thousand words'—how we look, how we sound, and how we project—is important. So winning the picture is important, and [so is] having a president with the right kind of people to drive and hone the emphasis of the message, [so he will] be seen in a positive, warm, and strong way."⁴⁰

After White House strategists determine what themes they want to communicate, their implementation people decide how to structure an instructive event, and their operations people set everything up and frame the pictures so that they will communicate what the planners and implementers want to convey. Scott Sforza, communications assistant in the administration of George W. Bush, capitalized on his background in television and his experience with White House policymakers to make sure that both sides were handled well. As he said, "I sort of use the rule of thumb, if the sound were turned down on the television when you are just passing by, you should be able to look at the TV and tell what the president's message is. If you are passing by a storefront and see a TV in the window, or if you are at a newspaper stand and you are walking by, you should be able to get the president's messages in a snapshot, in most cases."

Among other things, Sforza was the official who designed the backdrops that appeared behind the president when he spoke in indoor locales around the country. For a speech about homeland security delivered in Kansas City, this "wallpaper" was lined with the phrase "Protecting the Homeland," interspersed with profiles of a firefighter. At the White House, where these message banners were only occasionally used, the preference was for scenic locales in and around the White House itself. In his effort to produce precisely the pictures he wanted, Sforza left no detail to chance. The scene behind the president was chosen with the aim of maximizing the impact of the "tight" shots that television cameras were most likely to use. And the president spoke from a special podium tagged "Falcon" because its top

³⁹ The remainder of this section is from Martha Joynt Kumar, *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 100–104; reprinted by permission from Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴⁰ Karl Rove, interview by author, Washington, DC, May 8, 2002.

seems to hunch over a thin stem, which has been crafted to allow televised close-ups to show as much of a selected background as possible.

According to Sforza, “Falcon” was “designed so that you can see the lower portions [of a picture]. You can see around it. So it really opened up the shot for us, and you could see the process behind it.” He continues, “It made for a much, much better event. When you look at the photos, you can tell it’s really—it’s a striking difference. So it has had just really terrific results. We have had great results with it, even in events where we have message banners. You can see the banners much better, because this sits lower, and it really plays well with that backdrop, so it doesn’t dominate the show.”⁴¹

Until the end of the twentieth century, presidents had very few choices when they wanted to go live on television with a speech. Most of them used the Oval Office as their setting. In addition to the eleven addresses he delivered to Congress during his eight years in office, President Clinton made nineteen formal Addresses to the Nation. Fifteen of them came from the Oval Office. By December 15, 2006, in Bush’s sixth year, setting aside his two inaugurals and his seven addresses to Congress, only five of his twenty Addresses to the Nation took place in the Oval Office. Seven of them were delivered in locales other than Washington—namely Crawford, Texas; New York; Cincinnati; Atlanta; New Orleans; Fort Bragg, North Carolina; and an aircraft carrier. The remaining eight were staged in other White House locations: three from the Cabinet Room; four in Cross Hall (located on the first floor of the White House midway between the East Room and the State Dining Room); and one from the White House Treaty Room.⁴²

Thanks to the fiber-optics technology that was in place by the time he was elected, and thanks to the Clinton communications operation, President George W. Bush could appear live on television in a matter of minutes from several locations in the White House itself, in the West Wing, and on the White House grounds, such as the South Lawn and the East Garden. While the Clinton communications team was responsible for acquiring this technology, only the Briefing Room and the East Room were wired when Clinton left office.

On October 7, 2001, when President Bush addressed the nation to announce a campaign of military strikes against Al Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan, he spoke from the White House Treaty Room, so named because it was where President William McKinley signed the treaty that ended the Spanish-American War. Bush began his speech at 1:00 p.m. Through the window behind him one could glimpse the midday traffic on Constitution Avenue.

No president had delivered a speech from this room before. President Bush and his staff selected it because they felt the visuals themselves would convey important messages. “The President wanted to really address the nation in a different way than he had before,” remembered Sforza. “He enjoyed the history of the room, and what it was all associated

⁴¹ Scott Sforza, interview by author, Washington, DC, June 27, 2002.

⁴² The Clinton and Bush figures are from the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, now produced as the *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* and available online at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collection.action?collectionCode=CPD>. The Clinton figures come from the document category Addresses to the Nation and counts of the individual items. The Bush figures represent counts from 2001 to January 2006 in the following categories: Addresses to the Nation, Addresses and Remarks, Radio Addresses, Bill Signings—Remarks, and Meetings with Foreign and International Leaders.

with.” He also wanted the traffic in the background: “We wanted . . . [to] send a message to the world that we’re still in business here.”⁴³

In earlier times, a satellite truck arriving the day prior to the event would have been needed for a television broadcast, and it would have taken a lot of time to set up all of the necessary equipment. The existence of fiber-optic lines “really enabled us to go on the air much quicker than we ever would have been able to the old way, the way it was 10 years ago,” said Sforza. “So this way it’s a very short cable line. You just plug it in and you’re ready to go. And with that speech in particular we had as little time as possible to notify the networks.” Instead of the previously required hour-and-a-half warning, “we were able to notify them in 15 minutes, 20 minutes before we would go on the air.”⁴⁴

“Winning the picture” is important for any administration. But Bush’s communication staffers were more sensitive than their predecessors of the need to reach particular segments of the public through television. Even though the Internet has attracted a large number of readers, television is still an important source of news for most who follow it. The goal of “winning the picture” influences how departments and agencies showcase presidential policies as well as what the White House and the president do. The creation by outside contractors paid by government departments and agencies of video news releases to be shown at the regional and local levels in addition to the national one is a practice that builds on traditional efforts to shape newspaper coverage.

The “picture” is an area where the White House can make use of changes in technology as well. When asked about the differences in broadcasting the president’s image between 2002 and 2006, Sforza pointed to some of the developments. “It’s a lot easier to get a satellite signal out. It’s easier to do the video taping—a lot of the networks, the locals have the ability to turn stories around much more quickly now that there is an advancement in the editing capability and the software that’s available.” These changes require staff to assess how networks and local television stations broadcast in order to make the most of their opportunities getting television time.

When President Bush announced what the administration considered to be the end of military operations in Iraq, he and his staff did so in a dramatic location. Through developments in video technology, they were able to broadcast live from the Pacific Ocean while the USS *Abraham Lincoln* was moving. That was previously not possible, Sforza said, as the transmitters would “always hit black holes when . . . traveling through the ocean.” For the USS *Abraham Lincoln* event in which President Bush landed in a F-16 fighter jet, improved technology allowed a clear, stable signal for transmitting the president’s arrival and his speech given at dusk. “That was the first time that we used this new technology, which was a Sea-Tel Antenna . . . that could lock in to a KU-band satellite signal while moving.” That meant continued transmission for all news organizations without any loss of signal while they journeyed toward San Diego.

However, the USS *Abraham Lincoln* event demonstrated the problems that can arise when a communications operation focuses so heavily on the technology of an event that one misses larger communications problems. The White House made a sign that served as a backdrop when President Bush spoke. The sign read “Mission Accomplished.” Sforza said that the sign was requested by the ship’s commander, who wanted it because the crew had been at sea for eleven months. The president’s critics portrayed the sign as a presidential

⁴³ Sforza interview, June 27, 2002.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

announcement that the war in Iraq was over, which proved to be far from the case. Sforza said that the sign “took on a life of its own, and to this day they still try to apply it like an anniversary of the ‘Mission Accomplished’ speech.” Though the president was reluctant to declare an end to hostilities, the sign seemed to indicate that he had. The communications staff learned that “the image overrides even sometimes the truth.”⁴⁵

BRINGING CAMPAIGN TECHNOLOGY AND RELATED STRATEGIES INTO THE WHITE HOUSE

Technology plays an important role in the flexible nature of the communications operation. Each White House identifies the communications tools it wants to use and then implements them accordingly. When the Carter administration came into office, the staff brought with them techniques they had used on the campaign. One of their early actions in the communications area was to create a Radio Actuality Line, which had taped highlights of the president’s speeches and remarks. Radio stations around the country could call into the line and air the segments they found interesting. Jody Powell remembers its creation. “Actually, [it came] from the campaign. We’d been successful in getting the candidate on the air, talking about things by doing those sorts of feeds, and that sort of thing. Of course, I remember what an uproar there was about it back in those days.”⁴⁶ While they did not have a campaign unit to deal with the local press, the Carter campaign operation directed attention toward the local and regional press during the campaign and once in the White House established a regular presidential press briefing with the local and regional reporters. “It was not something we had done directly in the campaign, but the sort of idea behind it [was] the importance of local news, which nowadays is even more so, and that you ought to really invest some time in cultivating those relationships and using those outlets, too,” Powell remarked. The usefulness in setting up regular meetings and opportunities for the local media was evident in the coverage a White House got out of such sessions. Powell commented on the productive nature of the president’s meetings with local reporters. “We got—on the whole—pretty decent coverage out of those sessions that we otherwise wouldn’t have gotten.”

Other administrations have brought in technological innovations they used in their original campaign for the presidency. For the Clinton White House, that meant connecting to the Internet and establishing a website as a point of contact with a growing electronic public. During the Clinton administration, the White House regularly distributed information to reporters through the releases posted on its website and through the West Wing press operation. Having the site meant they did not have to use staff time providing paper copies to reporters and could quickly get the material to reporters requesting it. In addition, the Media Affairs unit used e-mail to send information tailored to its lists of local and national reporters. Technology provided the White House with the capacity to contact fine-tuned lists of news organizations and to do so with a click of a mouse. It also helped some reporters get releases from the Press Office that they might not otherwise have received.

⁴⁵ Scott Sforza, interview by author, Washington, DC, May 9, 2006.

⁴⁶ Jody Powell, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Washington, DC, August 2, 2000.

*OFFENSE AND DEFENSE IN THE SECOND BUSH
ADMINISTRATION: THE RAPID RESPONSE OPERATION*

Earlier we saw the way in which the Clinton White House operated to quickly respond to criticism or damaging events while the George W. Bush White House openly eschewed such an operation. As Dan Bartlett said, his views changed in the second term when he realized they needed a hybrid operation that did long-term planning but was simultaneously capable of responding to the current news cycle.

Following the 2004 election, Nicolle Devenish Wallace, the campaign's communications director, came back to the White House where she had earlier served as head of the Media Affairs office. She brought with her the design of the campaign's rapid response operation, as well as the people who worked on it. "When we won re-election, and we looked at . . . how do we marry the best practices from the campaign, which obviously was successful, and the best practices from the White House, which obviously was very successful. We . . . made changes," Wallace said. "And for the first time, we [had] a rapid response office."⁴⁷

Housed in the Office of Communications, the Rapid Response unit was responsible for getting out information to a variety of selected audiences within the administration, on Capitol Hill, among Republican party officials, television and talk radio producers and hosts, and interest group allies. Sent by e-mail, the messages quickly got into the news stream. "It is taking something good that is out there and distributing it in a different way," said Kevin Sullivan who headed the Office of Communications. The information served both offensive and defensive purposes, depending upon the need. The messages were "very helpful without question to administration staffers who work in the agencies, on the Hill, when they are dealing with reporters," said Sullivan. Outside the White House, others could make use of them. "Talk radio producers are one of our key groups," he said. "It provides questions for their hosts to ask sometime that they might not have thought of . . . For a radio host who doesn't have time to drill down into [a] military commission and know what it all means, you have a two-page document that explains what it all means."⁴⁸

The basic activity of the Rapid Response operation was a set of e-mails carrying the administration's positive and defensive messages. As the news cycle became even faster than it was in Bush's first term, the need to get into it is even greater than it was early in the administration when Internet news traffic was so much less. In the second term, newspapers, television networks, radio programs, and individuals in each had a variety of websites and blogs that released information as they got it. That put pressure on officials in the White House and elsewhere to come up with a fast response.

Rapid Response sent out messages with both positive and negative themes. The goal of the positive messages was to have people who were important in the Washington and administration community see items that they might otherwise have missed, especially ones that pull together current information. Their negative messages were aimed at dousing developing fires. Sullivan noted, "If we think something is misleading or inaccurate, the key is we want to get our response out before it becomes accepted, conventional wisdom."

⁴⁷ Nicolle Devenish Wallace, interview by author, Washington, DC, May 9, 2005, <http://www.marthakumar.com/interviews/2005.html>. This section on the Rapid Response operation is from Kumar, *Managing the President's Message*, 136–143; reprinted by permission from Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴⁸ Kevin Sullivan, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 30, 2006.

In an environment where there is so much information available to people in the Washington community as well as elsewhere, there is a need for sources that synthesize information. Letting allies and others know what the president is saying and what their priorities and responses are, and doing so throughout the day, is important for keeping them current. Josh Bolten, George W. Bush's last chief of staff, said that White House staff adapted to the profusion of information by having their own methods of synthesizing information, including within the administration. "We have adapted our mechanisms of coping," he said. "Along with the explosion of information sources, there has also been an explosion of ways of propagating and synthesizing information. Email is that. This is a White House that emails each other very heavily. We do physically get together; it is a small place. There is a lot of emailing of information back and forth. I think most of us pay attention to what the Press Office is putting out. 'In Case You Missed It' and things like that. And a lot of us rely on synthesizing sources."⁴⁹

There were fourteen categories of e-mails distributed to the list of 2,000 recipients. The typically one- or two-page e-mail messages fit both offensive and defensive White House communications needs. "Rapid Response by definition sounds like it's a defensive thing, but we look at it as a way of staying on offense," said Sullivan. "We're going to affirmatively, proactively, put something out. Because it is not always responding to something. It is taking something good that is out there and distributing it in a different way."⁵⁰

Eight basic categories of messages of the offensive type attempted to package information that people might have missed.⁵¹ The information could include presidential speeches, cuts from Tony Snow's daily press briefing, briefings by others, news articles, or op-ed pieces. The most frequently sent e-mails were "Morning Update," "Fact Sheet," "Straight to the Point," and "In Case You Missed It."

The "Morning Update" was a weekday daily sent at 8:00 a.m., in time for people to see the president's schedule, read newspaper articles with pertinent information the White House wanted to get out, including clips from interviews the president might have had with radio, television, or print journalists. The messages printed links to the articles or audio for the interviews for those who wanted the longer version and to links for briefings and press releases. The longest of the e-mails, it was broken into three parts: (1) the president's public schedule for that day; (2) "From the Morning Headlines," with perhaps ten lines of quotes from ten or so articles appearing that day; and (3) "From the White House," with links one could use to read the previous day's daily briefing by the press secretary, personnel announcements, and presidential remarks from the day before. A second kind of positive e-mail message, "Fact Sheets," provided background information on presidential initiatives or facts as positive trends, such as an increased number of jobs. "Straight to the Point" had excerpts from presidential statements as they happened. Most came out within an hour of the president's remarks. In one week, of the three sent out, one was within twenty-three minutes and another within forty-two minutes of the conclusion of the president's remarks. An hour-long presidential press conference with Prime Minister Tony Blair took one hour and twenty minutes to get into excerpt form.⁵²

⁴⁹ Joshua Bolten, interview by author, Washington, DC, November 17, 2006.

⁵⁰ Sullivan interview.

⁵¹ Such e-mails included "Morning Update," "In Case You Missed It," "Straight to the Point," "Fact Sheet," "What They're Saying," "By the Numbers," "Economy Watch," and "Medicare Check-Up."

⁵² December 11, December 6, and December 7, 2006.

“In Case You Missed It” was a targeted message that had one topic, with either a full text or excerpts. Four messages released during a week-long period, for example, contained the following information: excerpts from remarks made in Washington to President Bush and to the U.S. Institute for Peace by Iraqi religious leader Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim; statements arranged by topic made by Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq in a press conference the day before; and an interview with U.S. soldiers in Iraq conducted by talk radio personality Sean Hannity.⁵³ Other more occasional e-mails—“By the Numbers,” “What They’re Saying”—included information on polling (“8 of 10 Pharmacists, 7 of 10 Doctors Agree: Medicare Drug Benefit Helps Seniors Save”) and statements by others about their initiatives (“Bipartisan Support for Gates”).⁵⁴ The Medicare prescription drug program had its own e-mail message series (“Medicare Check-Up”), as did the economy (“Economy Watch”). Several of those messages included favorable articles and editorials; for example, one “Medicare Check-Up” message contained a *Wall Street Journal* article, “Once Unloved, Medicare’s Prescription-Drug Program Defies Critics, But Issues Remain.”⁵⁵

The defensive messages sent out by Rapid Response aimed to correct a portrait that officials regard as incomplete or attacked a story viewed as inaccurate.⁵⁶ The group of messages included the most frequently sent, such as “Setting the Record Straight,” “The Rest of the Story,” and, for its high impact, “Myth/Fact.” If officials believed a story was inaccurate, they would send out a “Setting the Record Straight” message pointing out its errors. In a May 10, 2006, message, “Setting the Record Straight: *CBS News*’ Misleading Medicare Report,” officials called correspondent Jim Axelrod on the carpet. He was quoted as saying on the *CBS Evening News*: “Hoping to nail down at least one clear success story for Republicans to run on this fall, Mr. Bush wants to add another million seniors to the 8 million already signed up.” The heading for that segment was “*CBS News* Misleadingly Reports That Only 8 Million Seniors Have Signed Up For Medicare Prescription Drug Coverage.” The message went on to dispute the claim, with short segments indicating that 37 million seniors had prescription drug coverage, that others could be program participants but didn’t realize it, and that the Department of Health and Human Services had signed up 9 million for Medicare prescription drug coverage. While facts abound in these e-mail messages, most often the difference between the articles and the White House response was a matter of interpretation and what the relevance was of the facts included in the messages.

In addition to providing another take on an issue, a product of the messages was the mark it left with the reporter or reporters singled out. Five months later, that particular “Setting the Record Straight” was still on Axelrod’s mind. Howard Kurtz, media critic for the *Washington Post*, spoke with Axelrod. “CBS’ Jim Axelrod recalls how Snow once issued a press release assailing a story Axelrod had done on Medicare eligibility. ‘He basically sent out this report calling me a liar, and then showed up at the booth smiling, with a handshake, and we had a half-hour chat.’”⁵⁷ In reality, Tony Snow did not decide what the messages would be, but Axelrod continued to smart from its sting.

⁵³ December 5, December 6, and December 12, 2006.

⁵⁴ September 8 and December 4, 2006.

⁵⁵ David Wessel, “Once Unloved, Medicare’s Prescription-Drug Program Defies Critics, But Issues Remain,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 7, 2006.

⁵⁶ Such messages are in e-mails with titles such as “Setting the Record Straight,” “The Rest of the Story,” “The Briefing Breakdown,” “Now and Then,” “Myth/Fact,” and “In Their Own Words.”

⁵⁷ Howard Kurtz, “Tony Snow Knows How to Work More Than One Room; It’s Gloves Off (and Pass the Hat) for Bush Spokesman,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2006.

“Setting the Record Straight” targeted news organizations for their reporting involving the success status of a variety of administration policies and programs: Iraq, Medicare, the economy, who benefits from tax cuts, the status of military recruiting, hurricane preparations, President Bush’s foreign policy, stem-cell policy, the administration’s climate change record, national guard troops, and border security. In one four-day period, the news organizations cited included the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *CBS News*, and the Associated Press.⁵⁸

When the White House sent out these messages, some news organizations took note of them. Perhaps the most successful of all of the series in terms of its impact on a story was the “Myth/Fact” message released to extinguish the flames coming from the book *State of Denial*, by *Washington Post* editor Bob Woodward. Adopting a defensive mode, the White House singled out five aspects of Woodward’s charges about the president’s understanding and handling of the war in Iraq. Together, the “myths” included intelligence assessments; an alleged request by Paul Bremer for more troops in Iraq; Condoleezza Rice’s response to a CIA warning about Al Qaeda; comments attributed to General Abizaid concerning Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s credibility; and supposed efforts to remove Rumsfeld attributed to Chief of Staff Andrew Card and First Lady Laura Bush.⁵⁹

The message was used in a variety of places and ways. The *Washington Post* published excerpts from the book accompanied by a box with a Reuters story detailing the five myths from the White House release.⁶⁰ Tim Russert used the five myths when he questioned Bob Woodward about his book, and Woodward brought them up himself on *Hardball with Chris Matthews* and *The Charlie Rose Show*.⁶¹ The myths also came up for discussion by the reporters or by Woodward in the morning and evening network news broadcasts, such as *NBC Nightly News* and the *Today* show.⁶²

In addition to being used as part of a news story and as a basis of questioning, the defensive messages had an additional impact: some correspondents were concerned that their reporting might be the subject of a “Setting the Record Straight” piece, observed Deputy Press Secretary Dana Perino. Perino was the staff member who was the point person for contacting reporters with complaints when White House officials believed an article was inaccurate. When she called reporters about a perceived inaccuracy, commented Kevin Sullivan, “There have been times when the reporter has said, ‘You’re not going to do a “Setting the Record Straight,” are you?’”⁶³

The decision to issue the releases was made in the morning communications meeting, which included approximately eleven people working in the communications area: Dan Bartlett, who hosts the meeting; Kevin Sullivan, communications director; Scott Sforza, director of television production; Jeanie Mamo, head of the media affairs operation; Dana Perino, deputy press secretary; Tony Fratto or Scott Stanzel, the other deputy press secretaries; Susan Whitson, press secretary to Laura Bush; Gordon Johndroe from the

⁵⁸ The four-day period ran from May 8 to May 11, 2006. As noted above, those cited included the Associated Press (May 8), *USA Today* (May 9); *CBS News*, the *New York Times* (May 10), and the *Washington Post* and the Associated Press (May 11).

⁵⁹ White House, “Myth/Fact: Five Key Myths in Bob Woodward’s Book,” press release, September 30, 2006.

⁶⁰ Caren Bohan, “White House Lists Book’s ‘Five Key Myths,’” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2006.

⁶¹ See *Meet the Press*,” October 8, 2006; *Hardball with Chris Matthews*,” October 4, 2006; and *The Charlie Rose Show*, October 3, 2006.

⁶² See *NBC Nightly News*, September 30, 2006, and the *Today* show, October 2, 2006.

⁶³ Sullivan interview.

National Security Council; Ron Saliterman, head of the Rapid Response unit; Eryn Witcher, who handled television; and Blain Rethmeier, who was responsible for policy communications. In that meeting, “We all talk about the news of the day and what we are going to do,” said Sullivan. “Rapid response is a big part of the decisions that get made.” While the unit wanted to respond to what they regarded as misleading or inaccurate as well as to put out good news, staffers didn’t want to put out too many of them. The team didn’t want to be “like a barking Chihuahua in the middle of the night where you are always yapping,” said Sullivan. “You have to pick your spots.”

The messages succeeded in getting White House information into the fast-moving news cycle. In both offensive and defensive initiatives, the Rapid Response operation got the attention of news organizations and insinuated the White House version of events into ongoing stories. While their efforts got the president’s words and explanations to the public through a variety of channels, there are limits to what such messages can accomplish. There is no guarantee the public will like what it hears in those messages. But at least the Rapid Response unit got presidential words and thinking to the audiences that the president and his staff want to reach.

BACKGROUNDS OF DIRECTORS OF THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Directors of the Office of Communications have had a variety of backgrounds (see Table 1). Speechwriters, reporters, government affairs people, and business and public relations people have served in the post. In some respects, the variety of backgrounds is appropriate for an office that a president and his team can direct in so many different ways.

Table 1. Directors of the Office of Communications, 1969–2017

Director President	Title of Director and Status of Office	Time in Office	Primary Experience	Secondary Experience
Herbert Klein <i>President Nixon</i>	Director of Communications, Office of Communications created by President Nixon, January 1969	January 20, 1969–June 1973	Press secretary to Richard Nixon as vice president and presidential candidate	Editor, Copley Newspapers’ <i>San Diego Union</i> , 1959–68
Ken W. Clawson <i>President Nixon</i>	Director of Communications, Office of Communications	January 30, 1974– August 1974	Deputy Director of Communications for the Executive Branch, February 1972–1973	Reporter, <i>Washington Post</i>
Gerald L. Warren <i>President Ford</i>	Deputy Press Secretary for Information Liaison (no Office of Communications), later Director, Office of Communications	November 1974– August 15, 1975	Deputy Press Secretary, 1969–1975	City editor, assistant managing editor, <i>San Diego Union</i> , 1963–68
Margita E. White <i>President Ford</i>	Office part of Press Office	August, 15, 1975–September 22, 1976	Assistant Press Secretary, January 1975–August 15, 1975	Assistant Director, Public Information, USIA., 1973–75

Director President	Title of Director and Status of Office	Time in Office	Primary Experience	Secondary Experience
David Gergen <i>President Ford</i>	Special Counsel to the President; restructured the reemerging Office of Communications and shifted reporting level up one big notch from Press Secretary to Chief of Staff Richard Cheney	July 1976– January 20, 1977, as Director, Office of Communications	Special Counsel to the President for Communications, April–July 1976 Special Assistant to Chief of Staff Richard Cheney, December 1975–April 1976	Consultant to Treasury Secretary William E. Simon, November 1974–December 1975, Special Assistant to President, speechwriting and research, 1973–November 1974
————— <i>President Carter</i>	No Communications Director, January 1977–June 1978 and August 1979–January 1981			
Gerald Rafshoon <i>President Carter</i>	Communications Director	July 01, 1978– August 14, 1979	Head Rafshoon Communications, Atlanta, GA	Handled media for Carter's two winning gubernatorial campaigns
Frank A. Ursomarso <i>President Reagan</i>	Communications Director as Deputy Assistant, reported to Assistant to the President David Gergen	March 27, 1981– September 15, 1981	Television production, Governor Ronald Reagan's presidential debates, 1980 and 1976	Advance man for Presidents Nixon and Ford; automobile business
David Gergen <i>President Reagan</i>	Director of Communications as Assistant to the President	January 21, 1981–January 15, 1984	Special Counsel, Ford; Special Assistant, Nixon, 1973–1974	See Gergen, <i>President Ford</i> , above
Michael McManus Jr. <i>President Reagan</i>	Acting Director, Office of Communications, reported to Michael Deaver, Deputy Chief of Staff	January 1984– February 1985	Arrangements for the 1983 G-7 Summit, Williamsburg, VA	Corporate law, Pfizer, and private law practice
Patrick Buchanan <i>President Reagan</i>	Communications Director	February 6, 1985–March 1, 1987	Executive assistant to former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, 1966–69; speechwriter and senior adviser to President Nixon, 1969–74	Syndicated newspaper columnist, commentator, 1975–85
John Koehler <i>President Reagan</i>	Communications Director	March 2–March 15, 1987	Transition from Chief of Staff Donald Regan to Chief of Staff Howard Baker	Associated Press executive, reporter
Thomas C. Griscom <i>President Reagan</i>	Assistant to the President for Communications and Planning	April 2, 1987– July 16, 1988	Ogilvy and Mather Public Affairs, President and Chief Operating Officer in 1987	Executive Director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, 1985–86, Press Secretary to Senator Howard Baker, 1978–84

Director President	Title of Director and Status of Office	Time in Office	Primary Experience	Secondary Experience
Mari Maseng <i>President Reagan</i>	Assistant to the President and Director of Communications and Planning	July 1, 1988– January 30, 1989	Director, Office of Public Liaison, May 1986–July 1987; Assistant Secretary of Transportation, Public Affairs, November 1983–April 1985	Speechwriting staff, January 1981–November 1983; Vice President, Beatrice Companies, Chicago, IL
David Demarest <i>President Bush</i>	Communications Director	January 21, 1989–August 23, 1992	1988, manager, George H. W. Bush presidential campaign	Assistant Secretary of Labor, Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, 1987–1988
Margaret Tutwiler <i>President George H.W. Bush</i>	Communications Director	August 23, 1992– January 21, 1993	Assistant Secretary of State, Public Affairs, and Spokesperson, 1989–92	Assistant Treasury Secretary, Public Affairs; Assistant to Chief of Staff James A. Baker III; Deputy Assistant to the President, Public Affairs, 1981–89
George Stephanopoulos <i>President Clinton</i>		January 20, 1993–May 29, 1993	Senior political adviser, 1992, Clinton–Gore Campaign	Floor leader for House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt; 1988, Dukakis-Bentsen presidential campaign
Mark D. Gearan <i>President Clinton</i>	Assistant Director to the President and Director of Communications and Strategic Planning	June 7, 1993– June 21, 1995	Deputy Chief of Staff; deputy to Transition Director Warren Christopher, 1992	Al Gore campaign manager, 1992; national headquarters press secretary, Dukakis presidential campaign
Donald A. Baer <i>President Clinton</i>	Assistant to the President and White House Director of Strategic Planning and Communications	August 14, 1995– July 31, 1997	Chief Speechwriter, April 1994–August 1995	<i>U.S. News & World Report</i> writer-editor, 1987–94; lawyer, magazine writer, New York City
Ann Lewis <i>President Clinton</i>	Communications Director	July 31, 1997– March 10, 1999	Deputy Campaign Manager and Director of Communications, 1996 Clinton-Gore reelection campaign; Vice President for Public Policy, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 1994–95	Assistant Secretary of Labor, Public Affairs, May 17, 1993 (national affairs)
Loretta M. Ucelli <i>President Clinton</i>	Assistant to the President and Director of White House Communications	March 10, 1999– January 20, 2001	Associate Administrator for Communications, Education and Public Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency, March 2, 1993–March 10, 1999	Director of Communication, National Abortion Rights Action League, 1992–93
Karen Hughes <i>President George W. Bush</i>	Counselor to the President, managed the White House Offices of	January 20, 2001–July 29, 2005	Communications Director, 2000 Bush presidential campaign; 1994 and 1998	Director of Communications, Governor George W.

Director President	Title of Director and Status of Office	Time in Office	Primary Experience	Secondary Experience
	Communications, Media Affairs, Speechwriting, and Press Secretary		Bush gubernatorial campaigns	Bush, 1994–2000; Executive Director, Republican Party of Texas; TV news reporter
Dan Bartlett <i>President George W. Bush</i>	Assistant to the President for Communications and White House Communications Director	October 2, 2001– January 5, 2005	Deputy Assistant to the President and Principal Deputy to Counselor Karen Hughes	Deputy to Policy Director, Governor’s Office, Austin, 1994–98; worked in 1998 reelection campaign
Nicolle Devenish Wallace <i>President George W. Bush</i>	Assistant to the President for Communications, headed Office of Communications	January 5, 2005– June 30, 2006	Communications Director, Bush-Cheney ’04 Inc.; Special Assistant to the President and Director of Media Affairs at White House	Press Secretary, Governor Jeb Bush, 1999; Communications Director, Florida State Technology Office, 2000
Kevin Sullivan <i>President George W. Bush</i>	Assistant to the President for Communications, headed Office of Communications	July 24, 2006– January 20, 2009	Assistant Secretary of Education for Communications and Outreach; NBC Universal and NBC Sports	Vice President for Communications, Dallas Mavericks
Ellen Moran <i>President Obama</i>	Assistant to the President and Communications Director	January 20, 2009–April 21, 2009	Executive Director, Emily’s List	Democratic National Committee; AFL-CIO, political department
Anita Dunn <i>President Obama</i>	Assistant to the President and Communications Director	April 21, 2009– November 30, 2009	Senior adviser directing communications, policy, and research operations, Obama for America	Directed Hopefund, Senator Obama’s political action fund; SKD Knickerbocker, partner, 1993–present
Dan Pfeiffer <i>President Obama</i>	Assistant to the President and Communications Director	November 30, 2009–January 25, 2013	Communications director, 2007–2008 Obama presidential campaign	Director, Communications Office, Obama-Biden Transition
Jennifer Palmieri <i>President Obama</i>	Assistant to the President and Communications Director	January 25, 2013–April 1, 2015	President, Center for American Progress Action Fund	National Press Secretary, John Edwards presidential campaign; Deputy Press Secretary, Clinton White House
Jen Psaki <i>President Obama</i>	Assistant to the President and Communications Director	April 1, 2015– January 20, 2017	Spokesperson, State Department	Deputy Communications Director and Deputy Press Secretary, President Obama
Sean Spicer <i>President Trump</i>	Assistant to the President, Press Secretary, Communications Director	January 20, 2017–	Communications Director and Chief Strategist, Republican National Committee	Co-founder and partner, Endeavor Global Strategies

Director President	Title of Director and Status of Office	Time in Office	Primary Experience	Secondary Experience
Michael Dubke	Assistant to the President and Communications Director	March 6, 2017–	Founder, Crossroads Media	Co-founder and president, Americans for Job Security

THE WORK OF THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

More than is true for most of the offices in the White House, the Office of Communications is fairly unique in the degree to which its director determines the organization of the office. There is substantial variation in what communications directors emphasize as their basic role. When you look at the Obama White House you see different advisers working with a particular aspect of the general communications role. Jen Psaki explained the roles played by several Obama advisers depending upon the strengths of the advisers and the missions at the time: “It’s dependent on the person. David Axelrod was obviously very involved in closely advising the President on strategy and media strategy, messaging. And he worked very closely with the speechwriters. . . . David Plouffe . . . had his eye on the reelection campaign.” Psaki added that Plouffe was also involved in “political strategy, strategy of messaging as well. I would say Dan [Pfeiffer] played a version of that role as well.” At the end of the administration, a senior communications official, Shailagh Murray, was “more looking to kind of the longer-term transition to how he leaves office.”⁶⁴

The Clinton White House provides an example of the various ways in which communications can be organized. Seven people exercised the communications function, though only five had the title of communications director. Those holding the post managed the job in at least three ways: as an advocate with the press, as a strategist and planner, and as an events coordinator. While directors may perform all of those roles, they tend to emphasize one of them. In the Clinton White House, Communications Directors George Stephanopoulos and Mark Gearan were primarily advocates with the press, Don Baer was a strategist and planner, and Ann Lewis and Loretta Ucelli emphasized the events planner aspect of the job.

THREE MODELS OF COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTORS: ADVOCATE WITH THE PRESS, STRATEGIST AND PLANNER, AND EVENTS COORDINATOR

The communications directors who acted as advocates with news organizations, such as George Stephanopoulos and Mark Gearan, spent a great deal of time working with the press, including appearing on television and speaking with reporters for print organizations.

Don Baer explained the work done in the early years and how the emphasis of the job changed:

Everybody, whether they were called Communications Director or Press Secretary, basically thought their job was to be Press Secretary and not to really be a Communications Director in any sense of

⁶⁴ Psaki interview.

laying down strategy, helping the various output arms of the public face of the White House to know what their role would be in the context of the larger strategy for public communications. I think there was some dissatisfaction about that fact; that in fact what most people spent their time doing was the care and feeding of the press rather than thinking about the strategic communications objectives of the White House and how best to push those out. So there was a desire to reorient that role somewhat more in the other direction. Erskine Bowles, I think, played a big part because he had just come in as deputy Chief of Staff with communications or strategic communications—whatever it was called—and Scheduling and Advance and a few other things like that under him. The whole purpose and idea was to try to get those units coordinating better because all of those are very important bits and pieces of what the larger strategic objectives of the White House would be.⁶⁵

Don Baer held the title of director of strategy and planning when he accepted the communications job during the early phase of the 1996 reelection campaign. The goal of the strategy he worked on was, of course, the reelection of President Clinton. All of the office's strategies focused either directly or indirectly on a presidential win. Baer described how his position differed from the one held by his predecessor:

The job I was promoted into was not the Director of Communication. That job had been ended; it no longer existed. Mark Gearan had been moved into a job title from Director of Communications sometime after the 1994 election into a new title. I think it was Assistant to the President for Strategic Planning and Communications. So that was the job that Mark had in the last nine months of his term and the job that I had the entire time that I was there pretty much. . . . But there was a specific decision made to end the traditional Communications Director role, or at least the way it had been practiced in the first two years of the [Bill] Clinton presidency, and to try to reorient it more as a strategic adviser's role rather than a communications role per se.⁶⁶

Once the election was over and Baer had left the White House, Ann Lewis took the post. She focused on staging events to showcase the president's policies, as did her successor, Loretta Ucelli. Both Lewis and Ucelli held the title of communications director. Neither was regarded as a spokesperson for the White House in the same sense that Stephanopoulos and Gearan were. Lewis did appear as a defender of the president during the early stages of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, but Press Secretary Mike McCurry was the central spokesperson. Ucelli did not appear publicly on behalf of the administration. Baer observed that Ucelli "reverted to the title of Director of Communications, which is what the office is now known as. So when I left, it stopped being the Director of Strategic Planning and Communications. And it's important, I think, to note that every one of those people has treated the job somewhat differently in terms of where they fit within the overall operation and function of the White House and things that they emphasized."⁶⁷

The duties performed by the communications director in the Clinton White House depended upon the individual who held the post, who else was working on communications—including David Gergen—and the individual's connection to the reelection campaign as well as the wishes of the president. The same three roles can be found in earlier administrations. The press advocate role was exercised by Herb Klein and Ken Clawson in the Nixon administration, by Gerald Warren in the Ford administration, and by Patrick Buchanan in the Reagan administration. The strategist role was performed by communications directors in office during presidential reelection campaigns, including David Gergen in the Ford and Reagan administrations, Gerald Rafshoon in the Carter administration, and Thomas Griscom in the Reagan administration. The role of event

⁶⁵ Baer interview.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

planner was performed by Margita White in the Ford administration, Mari Maseng in the Reagan administration, and David Demarest in the Bush administration.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

While the job of the communications director has varied as much as its title, there are basic responsibilities performed by the director and those who work in the office no matter whether the individual works as a press advocate, a strategist and planner, or an events manager. It can be a general post defined by the director's work with the president on developing the larger message of his presidency, as is the case when the position includes strategy and planning in addition to communications. On the other hand, it can be a post that carries responsibilities for events management. The minimum the job entails is events management, while the greater role is defining the message of a particular presidency with a strategic plan to match.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT, COORDINATION, AND AMPLIFICATION

Message is central to the communications operation in terms of developing messages for the president and others to deliver. In addition, the tasks of coordination and amplification come in as well. The quality, strength, and the direction of the message depend upon the ability of the president and his team to focus on their agenda and not let the entreaties of others overshadow their own interests. "Strategic communications is a balancing act," Don Baer said. "There are different pressing constituencies who want this, that or the other." The press secretary might want a press conference "because he's got the press corps beating down his door. Your people, different interest groups, or different folks who want your President to come and speak to them about their things or their issues. What you have to keep in mind is what you are trying to get done for the sake of the President and for the presidency and for your objectives and not for all of their objectives. It's a balancing act at all times." He continued: "That's what strategic communications is about . . . sort of balancing all that, the use of the available tools and resources to be able to keep getting that message out in a coherent way that's your way, not their way."⁶⁸

The communications director integrates political information and the work of those officed outside of the building with the plans made by those working within the White House. Baer described where the communications director fits into the process of presenting a presidency:

There was a small group of people, some inside the White House and some outside the White House, who were about getting the various operations within the White House, whose purpose it was to produce that public thing known as the Clinton presidency to all be feeding toward a sense of a common objective in terms of the political philosophy and ideals that we were putting forward . . . and how those policies met the needs of what our larger message purposes were in terms of what speeches the President gave and where he gave them; what he said when he gave them and to what settings and to what audiences he gave them; in terms of what those events looked like and how they were presented to the public; what message we were trying to convey by the very settings or the backdrops or the kind of people who were involved to the press office and the way they would talk to

⁶⁸ Ibid.

and deal with the press or the kind of press we were dealing with; which reporters or which journalists we were giving access to in determining what we would be doing.⁶⁹

Dealing with the policy people within the White House and in the departments is an important aspect of the job of a communications director. The communications director, as well as other staff, will sift through proposals that best represent the president's goals and select those appropriate to his message. Baer described the process this way:

All those things right down to and—people are sometimes taken aback by this, but it's, in fact, true during that period and largely I think still today—including what I would call the content people who are the policy people. They are the ones, in essence, who are providing the bits of information for the, if you'll carry the analogy forward, for the articles that are going into this thing known as, again, the magazine of the Clinton presidency. And the way I used to talk about—so there was a lot of involvement between the Office of Strategic Planning and Communications and the major policy units in terms of which policies we were going to put forward, when we were going to put them forward, in what sequence we were going to put them forward, how they were going to be presented, all of that; and whether, frankly, on any given day or night or morning they were actually ready, those policy points of view were ready, for presentation to the country.⁷⁰

Sifting through policy ideas means focusing on those central to the president's message and leaving behind the ones with only a tangential relationship to presidential goals.

I used to say that—and I think you can appreciate this—if there are 100 things that you can do, if your universe of possibilities are 100 things that you might do and in the Clinton presidency and an activist presidency that's probably true—there are probably 100 things percolating out there in the departments that they want done—but 50 of those things, maybe half of them, would represent you to the public as being something other than what you say you want to be. If you say you are a new Democrat, if you say you have come not to promote big government for its own sake or big government solutions to the kinds of problems that are new for the country today, but that you're going to present yourself as somebody who does things in a different way and uses government only as a lever to help catalyze people to do for themselves and, as the President says, make the most of their own lives. Maybe 50 of those things are the wrong message to be sending and maybe 10 of them are really right on point and really get to the heart of it, and maybe 40 of them are in the middle and there's some room for it. You have to be careful about the ones you choose, that you allow to percolate up and come to the surface. That was a big part of it as well, weighing in on and having influence over which of those elements of our content were actually the things that became public.⁷¹

Message Development

Message development begins with the most important resource a White House has: the president's time. A part of every scheduled event for a president is the message that attaches to it. Don Baer described the process of insinuating a message into events:

What happened was folks came to be trained to look to the communications operation for decisions, at least first-line decisions, recommendations that would go up, then, to the Chief of Staff and eventually the President for what the schedule would be, what the message aspects of each of the scheduled events would be—how those scheduled events, once they then got scheduled, would be implemented or executed. What else? To some extent, although not as much as I would have liked, what the sort of press strategy would be both in terms of a day-to-day strategy but a long-term strategy, those kinds of things.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

The State of the Union is an example of the development of a message that resonates throughout the year. Ideally it has all of the major elements of the president's policy agenda for a year. "I think it's true that . . . we realized that there is so much in the State of the Union that rather than save everything for the State of the Union, we could roll out some of the individual events leading up to it," said Ann Lewis.⁷³ "And we've done that ever since. And it's really important because you may have 25 or 30 good ideas in the State of the Union. There's no way that they're all going to get attention otherwise. So this . . . worked out really well." In other words, they just roll it out bit by bit. Often it takes the major portion of the year to work through the items mentioned in the address.

Don Baer spoke of message development as encompassing the larger message about the impact, importance, and purpose of the presidency. "To me, the job very much was about helping to form and develop both the larger message for what the impact and the importance and the purpose of the presidency was at any given moment, that's a larger message. Then the specific messages and strategic messages for public consumption purposes that came out of what that message and themes and purposes of the White House were, and to make sure that every office or every entity that had some role in conveying what that message and image was publicly, communicating that image and message and strategy publicly, that each one of them understood what their role was in doing that and in many cases working very directly and operationally with them to ensure that those messages, themes, and strategies were in fact being conveyed."⁷⁴

Message Coordination

Senior communications staff coordinate with offices within the White House, as with the Intergovernmental Affairs Office. They coordinate with every office that has a role in conveying the administration's message and work with units to make sure that the job is done. The director coordinates people, events, and information. He or she then coordinates with departments on which policies to put forward, when to do so, in what sequence, and how they will be presented. Don Baer described the constellation of offices that he dealt with inside and outside of the White House:

Speechwriting. Scheduling. Advance. I dealt a lot with the National Security Council and within the National Security Council particular offices like . . . the office that really ran the operational side of the NSC . . . But that would be about which trips are we going to take; what do we want to schedule when we're there. And I dealt a lot with the National Security advisers. This is actually one of the things I'm proud of. I was one of the few people from the political side of the White House that both Tony Lake [National Security Adviser in Clinton's first term] and Sandy Berger [National Security Adviser in the second term] thought well enough of to really bring into their decision process about what to do with foreign policy and how to convey it. And you know in this [Clinton] White House it has tended to be more of a divided thing. But I always did have good relations with both of them. The Chief of Staff's office. The press office. The office of someone like [George] Stephanopoulos or Rahm [Emanuel], people who are in those roles, which are very strategic kind of roles when they're done right.⁷⁵

Ann Lewis discussed the coordination involved in event planning under her watch. Those involved included all of the White House shops. "It's the policy shop that comes up

⁷³ Lewis interview, July 9, 1999.

⁷⁴ Baer interview.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

with the ideas; they come to tell you what you need to do, Scheduling and Advance, for literally what the timing will be of the day. Intergovernmental because they're going to talk to their constituents; political so people know what you're doing, and Cabinet Affairs because there's always a Cabinet officer. So you're literally going to have—and legislative. You are literally going to have every shop sitting in that room if you do it right so that everybody walks out of that meeting knowing what you want to achieve, what their responsibility is to make it work, and what they're going to say to their folks.”⁷⁶

No matter who serves as communications director, coordinating the message with department secretaries can be a problem. Don Baer spoke of the difficulties presented by Labor Secretary Robert Reich when he conceived and delivered his messages without consulting the White House at any stage in his message development process. “The President was in Hawaii for the 50th anniversary of V-J Day,” Baer explained. “Reich, without really clearing anything with anybody I knew of in the White House, gave a speech and his whole perspective on the news that weekend as he rolled himself out was one of pessimism, basically, that we're not doing enough for the poor, people are anxious and scared and nervous, middle-class squeeze. The old message which many of us thought was not the right message for the Labor Secretary of an incumbent President to be delivering three months before the beginning of the year when you're going to be running for reelection.” Rather than describe the progress made during their years in office, Reich emphasized the campaign message of 1991 and 1992 that “we're not preparing ourselves for the new economy and the people who are working the hardest, the middle class, are the ones who are not getting ahead in this new economy.’ Well, first off, it did not comport with statistical reality and the direction of the country.”⁷⁷ Reining in Robert Reich never got any easier for the communication director or other members of the White House staff who wanted to see him follow White House direction.

Message Amplification

Ann Lewis discussed another aspect of coordination, which is amplification. “The role is really to take whatever the President is doing today and get it to the largest number of people. Again, maybe that's through Intergovernmental, through state and local elected officials; maybe it's back to a cabinet agency like HHS [Health and Human Services]. But it's every other way of communicating the message other than the press. The press has its own operation.”⁷⁸ Some of the coordinating work is accomplished through Cabinet Affairs. “I think they do a lot of it. But it's usually done either through Cabinet Affairs or in conjunction with Cabinet Affairs, put packages together, and sometimes for Intergovernmental,” said Lewis. “But a lot of work is done to be sure. Thanks to our website, for example, we [got] talking points up every day. We [called] it ‘The White House at Work,’ which is something we started. So if you're going out as a surrogate, you can just pull down what the President has done for the last week or two weeks and it's there.” During the time she served as communications director, Lewis added a person to the office to work on amplification. “The second person I added was an amplification staffer whose role [was] to get the message back out once it's been done. How do we let everyone know

⁷⁶ Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁷⁷ Baer interview.

⁷⁸ Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

it's happened: get talking points out. Maybe the local government might get more information on this so they in turn can spread it. Taking the information, taking the President's remarks and communicating them back out."⁷⁹

CREATE AND ADMINISTER UNITS CARRYING OUT COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTIONS

One of the clues to the varied nature of the post of communications director is the lack of certainty about the units that are within his or her domain. There were differing numbers of people depending on the president, the communications adviser, and the time period in the administration when the person served as its director. The last communications director in the Obama White House was Jen Psaki. She described the office and its breakdown of function and numbers of people: "Communications is a team of about 75 people now. That includes ODS [Office of Digital Strategy], the digital team," she said.⁸⁰ The Communications Office includes "speechwriting, it includes specialty media that focuses on African American media, Hispanic media, LGBT and religious press as well. It also includes writing, an individual who does the daily talking points, a team that does events and rollouts." With two dozen people, Digital Strategy is the largest individual unit. The part of the office that traditionally dealt with the regional and ethnic press included "one individual who does African American press, two who do Spanish language media, one who does additional specialty press. Two people in regional press right now, but that can be two to four people. I should say, in addition, I'm not [counting] press assistants; there's a couple of them in a lot of these departments as well. Events and rollouts, that's about three to five people, depending on how you factor people in." Altogether the Communications Office had seventy-five people in the fall of 2016. The size of the office has varied widely in part because of the new unit of Digital Strategy and whether the Media Affairs unit and/or its functions were included in the office.

For the Clinton years, Don Baer discussed the people he was responsible for when he held the position of assistant to the president for strategic planning and communications:

What's interesting is that the people who were in my direct management line or indirect management line would not be an accurate reflection of what I had to be responsible for, because a lot of those didn't report to me but I would have to be responsible for what came out of their shops. Directly or indirectly, definitely on any kind of a flow chart would have been 30 or 40 people. Indirectly, if you throw in Scheduling and Advance—certainly the advance world in terms of what you saw on television and all that kind of stuff—another 50 or 60 people that I had to deal with.⁸¹

Ann Lewis indicated there were approximately twenty-five in the office under her watch: "I think it was 25. That included speech writing (domestic), research, events—which is a small sub-office—and after that sort of individuals . . . I will tell you, that is pretty much the structure as I found it, and probably the only thing I did that changed while I was here was I built up our capacity on events because I thought that was the single most important way we proactively got our message out, events at which the President, in his own voice, was going to be delivering a message."⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Psaki interview.

⁸¹ Baer interview.

⁸² Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

AN IMPORTANT SUBUNIT: THE OFFICE OF MEDIA AFFAIRS

In looking through the location of the office in recent White Houses under the various chiefs of staff, press secretaries, directors of the office of communications and the office of public liaison, and counselors, one can see that the unit is most associated with a general communications or publicity effort. Only in the Carter years and in the latter part of the Clinton administration has the unit been seen as a division of the regular press operation. At no time during the Reagan or George W. Bush years was the unit found within the Press Office. That is because it is by nature a planning operation and recent Republican administrations have viewed that as an element of the communications operation, which has often been associated with the chief of staff's operation. With the capacity of the unit to disseminate information outside of Washington and to coordinate information within the federal government, it is particularly useful as a resource of persuasion. With the interest of the Clinton White House in bringing persuasion into the Press Office, the placement of that unit there is telling. In the Carter White House, the opposite was true: it was housed in the Press Office because they had no persuasion outfit, only the daily operation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA AFFAIRS: A WASHINGTON BYPASS

Media Affairs has had so many organizational homes because it is such an important support operation for the initiatives of a White House that needs the cooperation of the president's consistencies. Mike McCurry spoke of the design of the office in the first year of the Clinton administration and hazards inherent in articulating a strategy of bypassing the White House press corps: "The idea was it would create avenues to local press coverage and you'd sort of bypass the White House press corps. That created a lot of animosity because they were flagrant about it," McCurry said.⁸³ "Jeff Eller [head of Media Affairs] "was always very voluble about how they were going to run around Brit Hume and get the message to the people," continued McCurry. "Well, that was like waving a red flag at the press corps and the White House." It was not long before Eller left the White House and returned to his public relations business in Austin, Texas.

The importance of the work of the Media Affairs unit could be seen in 1998 during the Lewinsky scandal. McCurry noted about the Media Affairs office:

When he [Eller] created that shop, he created a system of desks with high-quality press people working those desks that became in effect the press office for the non-Washington-based journalists. That still exists. We had exactly the same arrangement when I was there. But if you were like a Joel Connelly at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* or Phil Trounstine down at the *San Jose Mercury News*, serious political reporters who otherwise fit in at the White House briefing room but they weren't there because they were somewhere else, that was your press contact. So there were all these transactions going on getting information, getting story ideas, getting responses to inquiries out to the premiere political journalists around the country who were not Washington based. There was a lot of that all throughout the second term. I think arguably the fact that you still had some sense of a White House that was functional and working on these issues and substantively working on the problems of government that continued day in and day out. Then from the bully pulpit level we had [Bill] Clinton every day doing something that was reflecting his job. Even if it was just a picture or some little squib of information in the newspaper, not the main story of the day, people would at least have some sense

⁸³ McCurry interview.

that here's the President of the United States, he doesn't seem to be in a bunker, he seems to be doing what he is supposed to do.⁸⁴

MEDIA AFFAIRS STAFF INFORMATION: JUNE 2000 AND WINTER 2016

Office of Media Affairs, June 2005 (Bush)⁸⁵

- Director of Media Affairs 1995
- Regional Projects Coordinator and Specialty Press Director
- Specialty Press Assistant
- Regional Coordinator (two)
- Television Services Coordinator
- Radio Services Coordinator
- Deputy Radio Services Coordinator
- News Analysis Coordinator (two)

Office of Media Affairs, Winter 2016 (Obama)⁸⁶

- Director of Broadcast Media 2016
- Deputy Assistant Director of Broadcast Media
- Director of African American Media
- Director of Hispanic Media
 - Deputy Director of Hispanic Media
- Director of Radio
- Director of Regional Media
- Director of Specialty Media
- Media Monitor

Media Affairs is an office that demonstrates the manner in which a division can be bounced around among White House units.⁸⁷ At the same time, it is an example of the method by which publicity units are tied together with a common element being the staff's interest in reaching an audience outside of Washington through a planned and organized effort to send information favorable to the president to those reporting across the country.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Staff information comes from "Daily Report for Executives, White House Phone Directory," Bureau of National Affairs, June 17, 2005.

⁸⁶ Information is from *Federal Yellow Book*, Winter 2016.

⁸⁷ For a discussion of the Office of Media Affairs, see Martha Joynt Kumar, "Office of the Press Secretary," White House Transition Project, Report 31, http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/WHTP2017-31_Press_Secretary_1-2-2016.pdf.

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POLITICAL COORDINATION AND PLANNING

Gradually, as the political resources of a White House have expanded to include regular polling and consultants who take the president's political temperature, the communications director has become a link of the chief of staff to the outside political world. Don Baer took that position during the Clinton reelection campaign. To some extent, the duties of the communications director depend upon the period in the administration when the person is in the post. Beginning in the midpoint of the first term of a president, an important aspect of the job is to run the White House angle of the reelection campaign. If the communications director serves during the latter part of the second term, his or her job involves yet another campaign: the Legacy Campaign.

The Reelection Campaign

The influence of the communications director is at its height in the White House during the early period before the campaign begins, as at that point there is no campaign manager, the message is important, and he is the person who coordinates the message, people, events, and institutions. The communications director has an important role in the campaign, as demonstrated by just about every one of them in office during an election. David Gergen worked as a link to the campaign of President Ford in 1976, as did Michael Deaver for President Reagan in 1984 and Don Baer for President Clinton in 1996.

In addition to staging White House events for the president during the campaign, the communications person works on coordinating the message with the campaign and with its pollsters and consultants. In the Clinton reelection campaign, Don Baer had the role of coordinating the campaign with the governing operation. His duties included smoothing over problems in the White House that swept in from the campaign, such as the aggressive role in White House activities played by President Clinton's political consultant, Dick Morris. A good example of the volatile nature of the communications director's position is the way that Don Baer was caught between Dick Morris and Leon Panetta. Baer viewed Morris as someone who effectively "mined" the agencies for political and policy ideas for the campaign in 1995 and 1996, but Panetta was disturbed by Morris's actions, as they involved end runs around the chief of staff. Panetta described the problem presented by Morris's political work inside the White House:

I think if you think there's an end run going on—the first thing is to sense whether that's happening. It wasn't so much—the best example is Morris when he first came on suddenly decided he wanted to take charge of the policy operation and he started meeting with some of my staff. I immediately pulled him in and said you can't do that. Then he continued to do it and I went to the President. I said, "Mr. President, this cannot happen. I can't have a campaign type coming between me and the staff. If he's got things he wants the staff to do, I'll make the decision whether the staff does it, but I don't want him going around meeting with my staff." The President said "that's fine, do that" and told Morris the same thing. So that fixed it. You have to be very sensitive to that. You've got to make sure that's not happening.⁸⁸

The Legacy Campaign

Beginning with President Eisenhower's press secretary, James Hagerty, who carried out the functions of a communications director without having a title, the person in a White House responsible for communications also takes on the responsibility of designing and implementing the Legacy Campaign. The point of the campaign is to showcase what the president has done during his term on the policy front and wrap it tightly at the end with high public approval ratings for the president and his handling of his job. In Reagan's second term, Communications Director Thomas Griscom, and then his successor, Mari Maseng, worked on pulling together information on the accomplishments of the president and his administration. They prepared briefing materials and held events emphasizing their policy work. Griscom described how he organized the legacy effort: "I started by asking people, 'Those of you who were there in the first days of the Reagan administration, I want to see the documents you put together because you defined what this presidency was all about.' So I started that way and worked back."⁸⁹ In the last year, they gradually released information on the president's efforts on the domestic and foreign policy fronts. While there was some effort in President Clinton's final year to think about the president's legacy, such efforts were put aside as the president wanted to remain active until his final days.

PLANNING AND STAGING EVENTS

Strategic planning lay at the heart of the communications operation of President Reagan. Michael Deaver discussed how his Blair House Group was able to get ahead of events by setting aside time for long-range planning. Most White Houses find this difficult to do, but their experience paid off handsomely.

The Reagan group had a strategic plan that had as its goal shaping the manner in which the news was delivered through newspapers and on television.

So we had a strategic plan. It wasn't getting up every morning and reading the *Washington Post* and saying, "Oh my God, this is our day." It was many times going to bed knowing what the *Washington Post* [would say] and, hopefully, having written the *Washington Post* headline by what we had done. So from a communications standpoint we had a strategic approach. We had control and we had that structure of what we called the Blair House Group that gave it a continuing review by all the people that really made a difference.⁹⁰

Putting on planned events involves coordination of featured players and the staging of the occasion. It is the Communications Office that stitches together events, combining the

⁸⁸ Panetta interview.

⁸⁹ Griscom interview.

⁹⁰ Deaver interview.

resources and people of the White House with Cabinet secretaries, members of Congress, and groups involved in issues featured at the occasions staged at the White House. At the same time, the communications director is a manager because he or she stages events. Ann Lewis created a small unit that dealt with events management.

It's two people, but we would convene a message meeting for each event when I could talk about what is it we're trying to achieve here, what's the setting, what's the audience. And then after that it gets carried out . . . Well, one, my deputy director, Stacie Spector, had principal responsibility after that meeting for following up on events. I think communications right now, the way Loretta Ucelli has it, she has two deputies, one of whom is doing events and one of them is doing more the strategy. Then we had George Caudill who we call sort of the big picture guy who really goes out and says what will it look like and how it should be done. Again, Stacie, George, probably one or two people working [together]. It was a cluster, let's say, that worked around how you put on an event for maximum advantage . . . That's once the scheduling decisions were made.⁹¹

Following the decision to schedule an event is the decision of where it will be held and whether the President will take part.

Once a decision has been made—we're going to do Medicaid on X date—sometimes that means you already know where you're going to do it; more often it doesn't. It just means we're going to roll out X policy on X date. Well, do you do it at the White House? Do you do it at a children's hospital? Who's the audience? Who gets invited? How do you structure it to get maximum attention? My working principle was the most valuable resource we have is the President's time and we'll never have enough of it. So if we're going to use—I should say amplification as the second thing I added for the same reason. If we've got an hour and a half of the President's time, we better make the most of it. So everything from where it's held to what's the signage to what's the picture to what's the language, the goal is to decide all of that to strengthen the message.⁹²

Lewis went on to explain how an event on gun control, held in the Rose Garden, was organized:

That got set up pretty quickly. There are two kinds of events. [The first are] those in which we have the most time to plan and on which we have the most control because we're proactively rolling out a message that we care about. The second are events that are put together more quickly to maximize something that's happening. Here you've got a gun debate so it was decided I think the Friday before we would do an event on guns. In this case it was pretty easy for the setting. It was going to be the Rose Garden because we don't need to tell the story of guns; everybody knows what it is. We wanted to make the case that it was a presidential event and we began it as an event where women members of Congress would step forward and talk about why this was important to them. Now, the day before we heard that their male colleagues wanted to be part of it, too, so it got adjusted.⁹³

Legislative Affairs was involved, as people from that office chose the members to be included at the event. Lewis continued:

Once you do the meeting then you say, "Okay, Leg[islative] Affairs you'll tell us who the members are going to be." Again, because that was a concrete "here's the issue, here's what we're talking about, this is about members of Congress," that was simpler. A more complicated one might be a kind of community policing. We're still likely to do it in the Rose Garden because, again, for us saying this President cares about keeping you safe is important. We'll have police officers in uniform around him. And then who is in the audience? Local government might invite people in for getting cops grants; representatives of police organizations will be there. So it's a mix of people who are directly impacted by the announcement.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Policy is the focus of events, but how it is presented depends on the stage in the policy process and whether the Congress is in session. As Lewis explained:

The meeting would last about an hour and the number of events to be discussed may depend on how many days we have to fill. We can look at a month and have five message opportunities; we can look at a month and have three. It depends on what else is there. The President is going to be in Europe for eight days, and three days are already filled in; you don't have much time left. Or you can have a lot. . . . The second thing that makes it difficult is how much competition there is, how many of the policy shops have announcements that they are trying to put on the schedule. . . . Actually, you're a little more likely to do policy announcements when they're out of session because there's a little more space but you react to policy when they're in session.⁹⁵

Working the Press

An important aspect of staging events is to work the press. Coverage is what they want. In addition to bringing in television, the White House uses the wire services as the tie to the local community. "Sometimes the afternoon before you might give the wires—for example, if we're going out with the story on community policing and here's what it's going to mean state-by-state, you can give that to the wires and they will run in each of their regions a story about what it means for this community," commented Ann Lewis.⁹⁶

Newspapers are not so hard to deal with. Sometimes the White House operations aim at *USA Today* because of the newspaper's interest in issues that people are concerned with. "Very important," said Lewis, "because they like stories that are real and that have a real impact where they can show how it matters." She continued:

In that one there's kind of a rotation, if we get a story in *USA Today* by sort of giving them some information—I'm not sure it's a particular kind of story so much as it's just high on our list that we placed it. Again, I don't have to sit and plot how to do an event in order to get the attention of a newspaper. You can sit down and give a newspaper a story, work with them on the story, have the President give a speech. The reason I pay attention to events and the kind of setting I talked about is pictures for cameras. It's a different strategy in reaching newspapers. [Press Secretary] Joe Lockhart's briefing the day of an event in which he says the President's going to speak and sort of walks people through what it's going to be about will reach the newspapers. The combination of the President's speech and a Lockhart or [Gene] Sperling [National Economic Council director] or somebody coming in and briefing on the issues, that reaches the newspapers.⁹⁷

One of the major difficulties in presenting an administration is working with the criteria that the press uses to decide what is newsworthy. Lewis noted the interest of the press in the future—what is going to be proposed rather than what has actually happened. "I think it is simply easier to—people are more likely to know what you're going to do," she said. "It's easier to break through on a story about a new policy, a new goal, a new agenda. It is impossible to get press attention for something that's already been done, virtually. Aside from the stock market figures. And, if you can't communicate it, people aren't going to know about it."⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Measuring Success

One of the duties of the communications director is to measure the success of the office's operations. This is most often done through a combination of anecdotes and press clippings. Polling counts here as well. Ann Lewis offered this comment:

It's a little bit more anecdotal than I'd like, but you try to test—there's a lot of public poll data available and how well people think you're doing and what they know about what you're doing, that's useful. But the other is you can get clippings; is it being used? Is it appearing? Do people know what you're doing? It's anecdotal but it's sort of trustworthy because people ask for more of it. When you do something that works, you're going to hear that they want a lot more of it. . . . I'll go out someplace and give a speech and people will talk about what they've heard that we're doing, what they think, what they know about, how it is they're getting their information.⁹⁹

In addition to anecdotal information, polling is a way of measuring success for an administration. When asked what polls tell the White House, Lewis observed, "Like most institutions, polls can tell you, if you read them right, what people know about what you're doing, what they may not know and you want to work harder to get the message out."¹⁰⁰ Knowing the public's assessment of what they were doing worked in their favor as the Clinton White House designed strategy to advance policy with a communications plan to accompany it.

The development of social media has given White House staff additional opportunities to reach targeted audiences and shape their views of the president and what they know about him.

MESSAGE RESOURCES: VENUES AND PEOPLE

VENUES FOR MEETING REPORTERS

How presidents interact with reporters has changed over the period since 1981 when there were three television networks and President Reagan could command prime time for an hour while he answered reporters' questions. No president since that time has had more than four prime-time news conferences (Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama) while Reagan had thirty in his eight years in office.

Changes in the ways in which people get their information from 1981 when Reagan came into the presidency and 2017 when Donald Trump became president have changed how and where presidents have met with reporters and the types of media they favor. The consistent feature of presidents meeting with reporters to answer their questions is the presidential press conference. Since 1913, when President Wilson held the first one in his first month in office, presidents have consistently held those sessions even if there have been changes in their structure and audience. President Eisenhower moved them from off-the-record sessions to on the-record ones and with that action, the numbers of solo sessions waned. In their place, President George H.W. Bush moved to joint sessions with foreign leaders where reporters posed two or three questions to the president and to his foreign visitor rather than twenty or so queries in a solo session. His successors followed his lead and continued the pattern of joint press conferences. As peoples' viewing habits changed

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

and they no longer watched the three television networks, favoring instead Facebook and Twitter for their news updates, presidents moved to interviews in order to target their particular audiences.

As shown in Table 2, the last three presidents have had a similar number of total interchanges with reporters, but they have favored different venues to meet reporters to answer their queries.¹⁰¹ For Obama, interviews were his favored forum for meeting reporters because he and his staff could choose what audience he wanted to target and when he preferred to do so. President George W. Bush divided his attention between interviews and short question and answer sessions where he could respond to a question or two from reporters representing the full group of reporters. Such sessions focus on unfolding events and whatever issue is hot at that moment. President Clinton enjoyed those sessions throughout his presidency. After President George H.W. Bush developed the joint press conference with foreign leaders as a substantial forum for press interchanges with the president, his successors followed his lead. We can expect in future administrations that interviews and joint press conferences will be the prevailing forums for incoming presidents. Some presidents might follow the Clinton example and prefer to react in real time to unfolding events.

Table 2. Presidential Interchanges with Reporters: 1981-2016*

President	Press Conferences			Short Q&A	Interviews	Total Interchanges
	Total	Solo	Joint			
Obama	156	65	91	107	1,070	1,333
G.W. Bush	209	51	158	463	452	1,124
Clinton	193	62	131	1,011	302	1,506
G.H.W. Bush	143	85	58	335	383	861
Reagan	45	45	0	269	438†	752

*At the 7.7-year mark for four presidents and G.H.W. Bush at the four-year mark.

†Through 10/9/87.

PEOPLE

In putting together events, messages, and the like, the staff works from a rich pool of resources and venues. Who is chosen as a speaker and what the person or persons will say depend on the goals of the president and his staff for the event. Their choices of surrogates and venues include the following:

The President

Presidential addresses include:

- The Inaugural Address and the State of the Union

¹⁰¹ For more a detailed discussion of presidential-press relations, see Martha Joynt Kumar, “Presidential Interchanges with Reporters: Six Observations,” <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/WHTP2017-40-Presidential-Interchanges-with-Reporters.pdf>.

- Oval Office televised addresses
- Scheduled speeches, including the annual Economic Message, the opening of the United Nations in the fall, and constituent association conventions, especially those held in Washington
- Speeches with a message at an event showcasing the president's ideas
- Addresses on radio, television, and the White House website played on Saturdays
- Presidential events featuring the president's remarks in one of the following locations:
 - Oval Office
 - East Room
 - Rose Garden
 - Roosevelt Room
 - South Court auditorium in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building
- Presidential interview locations:
 - Oval Office
 - Blue Room and Red Room
 - White House Library
 - Diplomatic Reception Room
 - Roosevelt Room and Yellow Oval in Residence for off-the-record interviews
- Press events:
 - Interviews with a news organization or a particular correspondent
 - Press conferences
 - Short question and answer sessions, often unscheduled responses to a reporter's shouted question
 - Appearances in the Briefing Room

The Press Secretary

- Announcement or response to a question during the afternoon briefing with reporters for an announcement or as a response to a reporter's query
- Exclusive to a particular reporter
- Background information provided to a reporter or group of reporters
- Information provided in the above ways by a deputy or by an expert in the administration, such as a department secretary

Senior Staff

- Chief of staff regularly speaks with selected reporters on a background basis as well as sometimes in on-the-record sessions.
- Chief of staff or those designated by him to represent the senior staff position appears on Sunday talk programs and morning news programs on a regular basis.
- Senior economic, national security, and domestic policy staff appear regularly on television news programs throughout the day according to the message the White House wants to send.

Policymakers

- Senior staff on National Security Council, National Economic Council, and domestic policy staff provide information to reporters as exclusives, on background, and on the record.
- Department and agency heads sometimes provide reporters with information, including at White House appearances with the president and in the Briefing Room.
- Vice president appears in some of the same settings as the president, including scheduled speeches and remarks in the above locations.
- First lady is sometimes involved in some of the presidential appearances, expressing a policy viewpoint of her own.

Outside Resources

- Interest groups often figure into events at the White House, where they can emphasize an issue, such as by providing a “victim” to take part in an event.
- Pollsters regularly provide information to a small circle in the White House for use in designing political and communications strategies.
- Political consultants can shore up the president’s image from a point outside of the White House, as did James Carville during many rough points in the Clinton term and, once they left the White House, David Axelrod and David Plouffe in the Obama years.
- Elected officials in the Congress, governors, and mayors often serve as witnesses supporting the intentions of the president and his administration.

DAILY ROUTINES OF THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

The routines of the communications director include regularly scheduled morning meetings revolving around the schedule and interests of the chief of staff and random afternoon meetings to coordinate the scheduling of people and arrangement of events. While the morning meetings are focused on senior staff, the afternoon ones are deputy-level meetings carrying out the plans and interests developed and articulated in the morning meetings.

MORNING MEETINGS

For Jen Psaki, the morning meetings began with a session in Chief of Staff Denis McDonough's with the assistants to the president that was smaller and more decision-oriented than the ones held later in the day. "The morning meeting in Denis's office, you discuss more sensitive information, and it's really a decision-making moment or opportunity, and the senior staff meeting is really a moment for providing information to a larger group of people about what's happening that day," she said. Following those morning meeting in the chief of staff's office and the senior staff one, there are smaller ones on topics. "They could be subject- or area-specific. We have smaller meetings related to communications issues with some of the people who attend the morning meetings," Psaki said. "There are smaller meetings that are broken into different policy areas, too."¹⁰²

Ann Lewis described the rhythms of her morning: "There's a 7:45, small senior staff meeting. I think it's eight people. We then go to a senior staff meeting, larger, at 8 a.m. After that senior staff meeting about another dozen people go off into [Joe] Lockhart's office to talk about sort of the press lines, who's talking to who, what are the points we're trying to make today and tomorrow basically. After that, every day varies." She continued. "Days will vary. When Congress is in and you're close to the legislative session, you're working on budget and legislation and that's going to drive your day. Earlier in the year you have more freedom to sort of initiate and set the agenda. You try to get out most of the issues you want to make the case for early if you can. I find it hard to say—it's not as if every Wednesday is like this or every Friday is like that. After that they vary a lot."¹⁰³

Don Baer described his morning meeting schedule this way: "Every day, depending on what job you were in and what the regime was, you'd have a small group meeting at the beginning of the day with the Chief of Staff and then a larger senior staff meeting that the Chief of Staff or his designee would run. Then you have a communications group meeting that was sort of designed to give them a heads-up on what was happening that day and all that kind of stuff. So those would be three things you'd try to do every day if you were in town. But there might well be what you would think of as subgroups of staff meeting at any time throughout the day."¹⁰⁴

MEETINGS THROUGHOUT THE DAY

Don Baer sketched out his White House day once the early morning meetings were over. His afternoon, like those of the communications directors who preceded him, was composed of meetings scheduled for individual purposes rather than being regularly scheduled, as the morning sessions were.

On an average day, there would probably be for me somewhere between 10 and 20 meetings in the course of the day that I had to go to that were meetings I had to be at because someone there would be waiting to hear what my opinion was or my plans were for something we had to do. At some point you have to plan for those meetings, think through what you're going to do. Of course, on this side would be the President's schedule, some of which would require my presence to either prep him or brief him or be in an event with him. That schedule of meetings would take you usually until about 7:00 at night and that would not take into account emergency meetings or crises or just some new

¹⁰² Psaki interview.

¹⁰³ Lewis interview, July 9, 1999.

¹⁰⁴ Baer interview.

thing that cropped up that required you to assemble a group of people in your office to talk about it. That would take you until about 7:00 at night.¹⁰⁵

EVENINGS OF WHITE HOUSE WORK

White House work does not end in the early evening. Even if communications staff members are not working in the White House, they attend social functions where they might meet people in and out of government who can help with the administration's communications efforts.

For Don Baer, evening was the time he went over speeches written by his staff prior to their going to the president.

By 7:00, hopefully somebody had a speech that was ready that was going to have to be delivered the next day or the day after that. As Communications Director, I would need to look at that. Even though I had a lot of confidence in the people who were running the speechwriting operation, and we would have talked over many times what it was supposed to be or what was going in to it, it's just always true that between the idea and the reality falls the shadow. So clearing away the shadow was part of what my job was supposed to be based on, what I either could intuit or knew directly the President or his most immediate advisers on these things would want in the speech. So there would be the need to read and edit that, and some negotiations over how it was going to be and if there was a policy that wasn't ready yet or came in differently than we had been told it would come in. All those things had to be made ready. It was rare that I would be ready to leave there before 8:30 at night and more common that maybe twice a week I would need to be there until 9:00, 10:00, 11:00 o'clock at night, all to go home and be up again at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning.¹⁰⁶

For Democrats and Republicans alike, it is difficult to get out of the White House on the early side.

WORK LIFE IN THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

As difficult as life is in the White House for staff members, only at the end of an administration is there a shortage of qualified applicants. The benefits outweigh the various pressures that make up the disadvantages surrounding White House work life. Ann Lewis spoke for many when she summed up the opportunity that working in the White House affords those interested in service there. "I get to work with people I admire, whose values I share, and who participate in making policy that's making this country a better place to live in," she said.¹⁰⁷

PHYSICAL STRESS INVOLVED IN WORKING IN A WHITE HOUSE

Ann Lewis discussed the physical side to working in the White House: "There is a physical stress, which is grinding, every day. You come in at 7:30 in the morning and you don't leave until after 7:00 o'clock at night. The time constraints, I think, are grinding for people. You have to assume you're going to put in part of your time on the weekend, almost every weekend. That's a lot of time. And if there's a meeting or something comes up later in

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Lewis interview, July 9, 1999.

the evening, you're going to stay as long as it takes. So it is both tough physically on you and, for people with young children or young families, it is a very tough set of choices. It's very difficult."¹⁰⁸

Margita White, communications director in the Ford administration, illustrated the physical stress involved in working in the White House. She left her post as communications director for a seat on the Federal Communications Commission. As much as she loved her White House work, she found it exhausting. She provides the details:

I was relieved when the FCC opening came up. I was exhausted going into the 1976 campaign. It's funny how this came out. It was in April, I think. I had been traveling all over the country on Air Force One or the press plane—a six-state trip where I had arranged several regional briefings and other events for the President. I got home at 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning, went to bed, got up at 6:00, knocked over a full pot of coffee on my lap, and ended up in the emergency room with second-degree burns all the way down my leg. As they peeled off the skin and I was in the emergency room, Dick Wiley, who was then the chairman of the FCC, tried to reach me to let me know that he had just been to the White House Personnel Office to urge I be appointed to an impending FCC vacancy he just had learned about that morning. When I got his surprising message as I came to, I thought this was something I wanted to do. Timing was everything. I'd drafted the proposal for the expanded Communications Office role in the campaign, but at that moment I knew I didn't have the strength to follow through.¹⁰⁹

While most people did not meet with exhaustion at quite that level, they do find they are worn out when they leave the White House.

ON CALL AND IN THE PUBLIC EYE

From the other side of the aisle, Thomas Griscom explained the way in which you bring the White House into your house when you work there:

You really are on call and accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You have no privacy. You do not go hide someplace. The stories about a White House operator tracking you down even if you haven't told them where you're going to be are real because that's their job. For whatever period of time you're there, if you're in the White House—your time is contingent on White House events and everything else is secondary. And that's hard. If you're a parent, if you have children, when WHCA [White House Communications Agency] shows up and all of a sudden starts putting White House phones in your house, you get a sense real quick that everything has changed and that there is a new priority in your life. And that factors into some of the goals and things that you set for yourself.¹¹⁰

There is special pressure associated with the scrutiny given a White House by the press, the public, and one's political opponents as well as allies. Ann Lewis observed: "The emotional strain I assume when everything you may say and do is enormously important, is watched so closely, and has potentially the impact that a White House statement does." Lewis discussed the pressure associated with the specter of lawsuits involving the work being done: "You add to that being in, as we are, a hostile political climate in which the danger of lawsuits, special investigators, having your notes or papers sort of called in on any particular issue is ever present."¹¹¹ Locating documents, meeting with lawyers, and preparing to testify all take their toll. Sidney Blumenthal, a senior adviser to President Clinton on communications, had some of his subpoenas framed and hung on his office walls and others

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Margita White, interview by author, White House Interview Program, Washington, DC, October 26, 1999.

¹¹⁰ Griscom interview.

¹¹¹ Lewis interview, July 9, 1999.

stored away. When asked about the impact of receiving subpoenas, he indicated it makes life in the White House more difficult. “It’s harder. It’s much, much harder. I think it was unique and that people will understand it over time, when they see historically how unique it was.”¹¹²

THE RESPONSIBILITY ASSOCIATED WITH WHITE HOUSE WORK

The stakes associated with a White House job are very high as they involve the reputation and career of the president. Thomas Griscom explained the pressures associated with taking actions impacting the president.

Unless you have dedicated yourself to this as the only thing you want to do, it is mentally and physically demanding on you. When you’re in the middle of a scandal, you are making decisions on the run quite often, you hope they’re right but nothing is 100 percent right. You will make a few miscues here and there. When you sit there and think about it, I’m sure this White House went through it. If I make the wrong call, if I say the wrong thing, if I look the wrong way, what happens if I’m the person who caused the President to be impeached. There is nothing I have found any place else that comes close to that level of responsibility that you can make a misstatement, you can make a bad judgment on an issue, and it can backfire. When it does, the stakes are real high. I think corporate America has some of the same interactions as a White House. That’s what I found when I went on to a corporate job, but there you’re not always on call. Something comes up, you deal with it. In the White House you never get away from it. You’re never away from it.¹¹³

Part of the pressure of working in a White House is being successful in your work. For Don Baer, in addition to the physical strain of the many long White House hours, there were others:

A lot of pressure and stress on you about . . . how did the thing that you planned a week ago play today when the President went out and did it? How did it play in the press? Did all the pieces of it fit together and go the way you had planned? How did he feel about it, because you don’t always have the time in specifics and even if you do, he’s not going to remember most of them to tell him exactly what he’s doing and why he’s doing it and what his place in all this is; here’s what he’s going to say. What did he want to say? Did it come out the way he thought it would?¹¹⁴

For David Demarest, the stress of White House work life often stemmed from knowing that everything you did during a day meant something important to someone around the nation:

The stress of the White House I think isn’t the nastiest part. You’ve got politics in churches; you’ve got politics in corporations. My CEO got fired at [company name deleted] and that was pretty ugly. So I’ve seen some pretty gruesome things on the corporate side. I think where the stress comes in the White House is that every day is judgment day. You are constantly up against an event, a speech, an action, a statement, a press conference. There is something every day that is significant to somebody. It might not be significant to the nation, but it is certainly significant to some subset of the nation that for whatever reason you have deemed or the White House had deemed important enough that there ought to be this engagement. All of that has to go right.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Blumenthal interview.

¹¹³ Griscom interview.

¹¹⁴ Baer interview.

¹¹⁵ Demarest interview.

TIME TO LEAVE

When the “irritation level overwhelms the exhilaration level,” it’s time to leave, observed Don Baer:

I felt like the very clear end zone for me was the election in 1996. I felt committed. I had asked my wife—I felt it was important I stay through that election. And I wound up staying for another six to eight months or so; four or five of those were about Erskine Bowles and the President had asked me if I would stay that long in order to help them bridge from the operations and what we were doing in first term and the elections into the second term. Then two of them were about me trying to figure out what I wanted to do next and just sort of the cool-down period. Even when I left, there was still the need at least for a year cool-down period, just for me as compared to my obligations on the other side of that ledger. You could say when your irritation level seems to overwhelm your exhilaration level that’s when it’s time to leave. That’s in very personal terms.¹¹⁶

In contrast, Thomas Griscom found he had no difficulty deciding when to leave, because he came in with a set of personal goals.

I knew it was time to leave. With any job I’ve had, I go in with a set of goals I want to achieve. They’re personal goals. I don’t print them or openly discuss them. Senator Baker and I did talk about them. I know what I want to achieve, and if I get them done, then at that point I stop and ask myself “is there something else now that is a reason to stay, or is it time to move on?” To date, I have never had a second thought after achieving what I wanted to do going in, that I said “I should stay longer.” That’s how I do it. But there were specific, personal goals that I had going into the White House.¹¹⁷

SUMMARY

The Office of Communications is an important White House unit for a president, and its director is vital to a president because communications is closely linked with a successful presidency. Formed in 1969, the Office of Communications has served for forty-eight years as a nuts-and-bolts operation delivering information beyond the White House environs, but also staging events in Washington and serving as a location where communications strategies are developed and executed. The communications operation provides a president with the opportunity and the resources to coordinate the publicity for his administration and to shape his statements and explanations in a manner that will achieve his personal, policy, and electoral goals. While there are those who would characterize such operations as presidential fluff, the reality is that, of presidents who were reelected in the post–World War II period, all had state-of-the-art communications operations. Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama had people and organizations who helped them coordinate information in the Executive Branch, develop targeted messages aimed at identified publics, and then amplify them in a manner capable of cutting through the fog that so often shrouds the public’s view of Washington politics and their president. For these reasons, the Office of Communications is a valued operation for the president and his White House staff.

¹¹⁶ Baer interview.

¹¹⁷ Griscom interview.

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