

Martha Joynt Kumar - Director, White House Transition Project and Emeritus
Professor, Department of Political Science, Towson University

Assistants to the President at 18 Months: White House Turnover Among the Highest Ranking Staff and Positions

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director, White House Transition Project and Emeritus Professor, Department of Political Science, Towson University

“It’s a difficult pace for many to keep up with. Look at how many people no longer work here [White House] [now] I think it’s a much more sophisticated, streamlined operation with fewer people.” Kellyanne Conway, interview with Eric Bolling, CRTV, 7/31/2018

If the most important resource a President has is his time, in second place is his staff. For it is a well-functioning staff that allows him to have the time to spend on his priorities with quality information and advice to back up his decision making process.

Assistant to the President-level staff. By statute and by budget, the top-ranking class of commissioned White House officials are titled Assistant to the President. Currently limited with some flexibility to 25 staffers, Assistants to the President form the principals who provide policy recommendations to the President and constitute the most influential group of White House advisers a President has. Over the years, the numbers of Assistants provided for by statute has grown from 17 in the Reagan years to the 25 of recent years. Among those with Assistant to the President titles in most White Houses include the National Security Advisor, the Chief of Staff, the White House Counsel, the Press Secretary, top domestic and economic advisers, and other aides at the top of the staff ladder. The turnover of the Assistant-level staff and the continuity of the titles assigned to them carries important weight in the stability and permanence of the staff and the functions they perform as well as the ability of a President to get a quick start once he comes into the presidency.

*** At the 18 month mark, President Trump had the highest turnover of Assistant to the President-level staff of any of the most recent six presidents.** Kellyanne Conway is correct that “many people no longer work here.” The figures for losses at the 18 months point for Assistant to the President-level staff members appointed during the first calendar year follow [January 20, 2017 – January 20, 2018 and comparable dates for the five other presidents]. The numbers may seem small but the impact of the loss of an Assistant to the President can be high in terms of the stability of the White House operation. The percentages of loss and the numbers are: Trump 61% [25]; Obama 16% [5]; George W. Bush 14% [3]; Clinton 50% [13]; George H. W. Bush 18% [3]; Reagan 26% [5].

As of July 31, 2018, during the first 18 months, 53 people titled Assistant to the President served in positions on the Trump White House staff. That figure far surpasses those of the earlier presidents in a comparable 18 month period: Obama 32 George W. Bush 23, Clinton 29, GHW Bush 18, and Reagan 20. See Table 1 on Assistant Staff Turnover on page 5 and Appendix A for those who have held Assistant positions in the Trump White House, who left and who remains. The turnover theme is repeated throughout the staff with a high turnover of jobs from high [\$179,700] to low [\$40,800] salary. Reuters reports the July 2017 and 2018 “Annual Report to Congress on White House Office Personnel” demonstrate the lack of continuity throughout the White House with 40% of the approximately 375 people included in the lists in the 2017 Report no longer on the staff as of the 2018 Report. See Table 1 for Assistant to the President staff turnover.

*** Position title turnover of Assistants to the President reflects a similar disruptive replacement pattern.** The Trump White House has gone through a much larger number of

Assistant to the President position titles than was true with the earlier presidential Assistant staffs. With restrictions only on the number of Assistants to the President and none on the composition of Assistant titles a President can create and use, there have been 43 different Assistant titles used in the Trump White House while, except for Clinton with 32, other recent presidents used no more than 26. Trump White House titles such as Assistant to the President and Director of Communications for the Office of Public Liaison; Assistant to the President and Chief Strategist and Senior Counselor; Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental and Technological Initiatives; all fell into disuse once the original staff members left their White House positions. While the other five presidents had five or fewer titles that were not reused in a similar 18 month time period, Trump had 13. For Assistant to the President title information, see Table 2 on page 10 for Assistant to the President position title turnover and also Appendix B.

*** White House staff stability is linked to effective early presidential transition planning.** Out of the six presidents studied here, those who extensively prepared for their transitions, faced few staff resignations and almost no Assistant title changes. They knew what their agendas were, how they planned to spool them out and implement them. Additionally, they thought through the qualities the staff they hired would need in order carry out these responsibilities and do so swiftly in order to take advantage of the good will that exists in the early days. With well-planned transitions, Presidents Obama and George W. Bush had among the most effective early months of the modern presidency, which is reflected in their low staff and title turnover. On the other hand, Presidents Clinton and Trump had early staff turmoil. President Clinton focused on selecting his Cabinet and only announcing his senior White House picks six day before the Inauguration. President Trump fired Governor Chris Christie, his transition director, the day after the election and then with Vice President-elect Pence in charge, planning began almost anew. The result of their lack of a well-planned White House entry was that both presidents had high staff turnover at the Assistant level and, in Trump's case, title turnover as well.

With both presidents, the staff turnover point to early leadership staffing decisions focused on who to appoint, especially campaign workers, rather than concentrating on the functions associated with White House operations. Once a President is in for a few months, he and his top staff realize, if they haven't before they came in, that White Houses follow particular organizational patterns no matter which party controls the executive branch as many of the needs are similar.

*** Positions related to function are central to a stable White House operation.** At some point during their first 18 months, presidents and their key advisers realize the top ranked positions that preceded them are going to be important for them as well. They look at the posts related to the decision making process [Chief of Staff; Staff Secretary, Personnel, Counsel], the key policy offices [National Security Council, National Economic Policy, Domestic Policy Council], and those that concentrate on managing a President's outside relationships. Those offices are: Legislative Affairs; Public Liaison; Intergovernmental Affairs; Press; Communications. These offices are key to a stable White House because they organize the decision making process, handle presidential policy, and manage a President's critical relationships. Gradually as they work through a large staff bench, the Trump White House staff have followed their predecessors and focused on meeting the twin needs of satisfying the President and appointing people with experience required to carry out a needed function.

*** Chaos or Energy: White House staff organizations reflect the choices of the President they serve.** What some see as staff chaos, President Trump views as staff energy. Presidents view staff success on their own terms, where their highest priority may or may not be their capacity to develop and carry out policy sustainable among the branches and levels of government. Having a hierarchical system with clear lines of authority was an organizational priority for both Presidents Bush and, to a lesser extent, for Reagan as well. That has not been the case with President

Martha Joynt Kumar - Director, White House Transition Project and Emeritus
Professor, Department of Political Science, Towson University

Trump. Under Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, many of the Assistants to the President and some of their deputies as well, reported in to the President without first going through the Chief. Similarly, today there are also people inside and outside of the White House who speak directly with the President. President Trump often acts and speaks publicly without first consulting his staff as he did recently on the status of white landholders in South Africa where the President relied on Fox News's Tucker Carlson for his information than on his State Department and intelligence community.

While most presidents have chaffed at the idea of having high staff turnover, President Trump has defended his staffing system and commented on his satisfaction with it. August 30th, he attacked news organizations for their portrayal of the White House. "They love to portray chaos in the White House when they know that chaos doesn't exist – just a 'smooth running machine' with changing parts." That is a Trump theme he has emphasized throughout his presidency. What others see as chaos, President Trump views as energy produced by competing voices. "It's got tremendous energy. It's tough. I like conflict. I like having two people with different points of view, and I certainly have that. And then, I make a decision. But I like watching it, I like seeing it, and I think it's the best way to go. I like different points of view." He feels little of the pressure previous presidents have felt to create a hierarchical system with clear lines of authority for permissions and reporting. In a recent interview with Bloomberg News, President Trump declared his White House "is a smooth running machine with some changes." A lot of changes.