



THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT  
1997-2021



Kinder Institute on  
Constitutional Democracy  
University of Missouri

*Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power*

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Report 2021—10

# WHITE HOUSE STAFF AND ORGANIZATION: TEN OBSERVATIONS

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director  
*White House Transition Project*

## WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

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

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

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

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

**The Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy.** A central element of the University of Missouri's main campus in Columbia, Missouri, the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy prepares students for lives of thoughtful and engaged citizenship by equipping them with knowledge of the ideas and events that have shaped our nation's history.

<https://democracy.missouri.edu> .

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## Report 2021—10

# WHITE HOUSE STAFF AND ORGANIZATION: TEN OBSERVATIONS

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Governing from the White House has been a central feature of how recent chief executives launched their presidencies. Surrounding themselves with key aides who served the President as campaign and policy advisers, presidents brought their teams into the White House where they made many of their initial appointment and policy choices, developed and rolled out their strategic plans for their priorities, and established their leadership style. The White House is the wheelhouse when it comes to presidential decision-making. People, policy, politics, and publicity all come together in the White House as a President works to establish leadership and swiftly move an agenda. Departments and agency positions take time to fill and a President wants to proceed rapidly to take advantage of the good will that exists in the early days of an administration. In that effort besides a President's time, the second most valuable resource a President has is staff. The organization of White House staff offices as well as where and how a President distributes coveted top positions are key to understanding White House operations.

The importance of the distribution of staff to understanding a President is as true as for President Trump as it is for the White House structure found at the end of the Obama administration. In the second term of the Obama White House, you see a cluster of senior aides involved in policy, politics, and publicity. (See Appendix for Obama White House Staff Chart for 2016.) By controlling those three threads, Chief of Staff Denis McDonough could coordinate the President's policy initiatives with the process of assessing and advancing proposals as well as dealing with congressional, executive branch, and outside groups and people interested in the proposals. By contrast, the Trump White House began with a loosely structured White House organization favoring the campaign and family members important in his political rise to the presidency as well as a mixture of people with backgrounds working in the business world and at the Republican National Committee

(See Appendix for Trump White House Staff Chart as of July 27, 2017).

Until it became clear that the multiple staff divisions were slowing the development of the President's agenda, creating a wave of leaks to news organizations from one staff faction seeking to undermine others, all resulting in poor staff morale, and contributing to a drop in his poll numbers, President Trump was reluctant to adopt more than a modest degree of staff centralization. At the end of July, however, Trump brought in as Chief of Staff General John

Kelly, Secretary of Homeland Security, who knew the President and the rhythms of the current White House operations. He immediately set in place a hierarchical system where all staff were expected go through him before seeing the President. Since the new system is in an early stage, it is unclear how diligently the President will respect and the staff will observe the new system.

What follows are ten observations about White House staffing patterns, priorities, and effective practices over the course of several administrations. While not illustrative of all of these points, organization charts are helpful to understanding White House operations. The assembled dozen organization charts focus on the White House staff operations of Presidents Trump, Obama, George W. Bush, and Clinton with a sample of three each for those presidents and one each from earlier Presidents Carter, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush. [If reading this essay without all of the charts, go to: [whitehousetransitionproject.org](http://whitehousetransitionproject.org) and look for a zip file on White House Staffing and Organization Charts by Administration].

Together, the charts demonstrate two aspects of White House organization.<sup>1</sup> First, they illustrate what White House offices existed under the six presidents and, second, how those presidents assigned their limited number of commissioned staff, the highest ranking White House staff members. A President is limited by law and budget to 25 Assistants to the President, 25 Deputy Assistants to the President, and around 70 Special Assistants.<sup>2</sup> How a President distributes staff among the offices reflects the chief executive's organizational choices and, by inference, decision-making structure. Staff organization tells us about who has access to a President and which offices are key to a President. Was there, for example, a strong Chief of Staff with political, communications, and policy planning units close-by as was the case with Leon Panetta in President Clinton's White House in 1994-1996, or, as in 1993-1994, the President's choice to have many top advisers report directly to him, not through the Chief of Staff? Such choices reflect important preferences about a President's decision-making process, a significant element in understanding White House operations.

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<sup>1</sup> The White House Transition Project developed the organization based on White House phone books. Where we could locate them, we used internal White House phone books as the most complete source of White House information. The Obama White House no longer has internal phone books and we found only some years for the earlier administrations. Alternately as our next in priority, we used National Journal's *Capital Source*, which published White House phone book information focusing on top and midlevel staff. *Capital Source* regularly published from 1985-2007. Information from President Obama's White House comes from the *Federal Yellow Book*. Sources for each of our organization charts are listed in the lower right hand corner of the individual charts. The organization charts are also available on our website: [whitehousetransitionproject.org](http://whitehousetransitionproject.org).

<sup>2</sup> The relevant laws for White House staffing are: 3 USC 105. Assistance and services for the President. The numbers and salaries of Assistants are tied to the Office of Personnel Management's Executive Level compensation. Executive Level II limits Assistants to the President to 25. Executive Level III has a maximum of 25 as well. Executive Level IV controls for Special Assistants and others covering a significant span of salaries and skills.

Other laws relevant for White House staff hiring are: 3 USC 108. Assistance and services for the President for emergency needs; 3 USC 106. Assistance and services for the Vice President; 3 USC 107. Domestic Policy Staff and Office of Administration Personnel. 3 USC 3109 Employment of experts and consultants. The text of the statutory provisions can be found at: [usc.house.gov](http://usc.house.gov). The text of the statutory provisions is available at [usc.house.gov](http://usc.house.gov).

The USC sections are referenced in the annual budget request in the Budget Appendix and the annual appropriations act which includes the EOP appropriation, currently the Financial Services and General Government (FSGG) Appropriations Act. The FY2017 Appendix available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Appendix>. The FY2017 text of the FSGG bill, as passed by the House, is available at [Congress.gov](http://Congress.gov) by placing HR 5485 in the search box and then reviewing the EOP section.

## WHITE HOUSE STRUCTURE

1. White House staffing structures are more similar than they are different. Over the past fifty years, continuity characterizes White House operations. Offices develop constituencies and once established, it is difficult to eliminate them even though a President could legally get rid of every office and the career people who come with many of them. Experience demonstrates they do not do so because most have constituencies that outlast an administration. With a staff member first assigned in 1929 to deal with the press, for example, the Press Secretary is the longest continuing White House staff operation. That continuity reflects the mutual need of presidents and the press, a kind of dependence that exists with other offices as well.

While White House offices are rarely eliminated, their reporting structure and duties can change depending in part on the nature of their constituencies and shifting presidential needs. Offices with specific, enduring constituencies, such as Legislative Affairs, have had similar divisions, functions, and tasks across administrations. Political Affairs, Communications, and Intergovernmental Affairs have not had the same stability and have shifted back-and-forth from being independent offices to subunits within others.

2. Rather than restructure White House operations, most presidents choose to layer new offices on to the existing White House framework. The greatest opportunity to make changes in White House organization comes in the early days, but the president and his staff rarely make major alterations to what they found when they came in. With a full policy agenda and pressure for a quick start, management structure is not a priority. Instead new offices find homes in existing ones. In the Obama White House, for example, staff added Digital Strategies into a previously existing White House communications structure rather than rethinking the whole communications foundation.

President Trump kept the basic offices and then created a bevy of White House councils to deal with specific issues. The American Innovation Council, the White House National Trade Council, the National Infrastructure Council, the Strategic Development Group, the American Technology Council, and the President's Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, are new groups the President added to the White House structure. The President also added on consultants, such as Carl Icahn, Rudy Giuliani, and Jason Greenblatt, who are not tied to specific White House offices.

3. The Vice President and the First Lady are now integrated into West Wing operations and have become important sources of support for the President. The dramatic recent increase in commissioned staff assigned to the Vice President and First Lady speaks to the growing importance of the two positions as support operations for a President. Both the Vice President and First Lady have become important resources for West Wing staff as they plan strategies to advance the President's policy goals. Vice President Pence quickly organized his office with reporting lines for an office structure that mirrors many of the West Wing office units. First Lady Melania Trump, however, who lived in New York for the first five months, was slow to organize her operation. At the six month mark, the office does not have the policy focus it had under Michelle Obama nor does it have the number of staff Obama had.
4. Prior to the Trump White House, there was a noticeable increase in top level staff with a recent concentration in the office of the Chief of Staff and, secondarily, a loss of top status

for a few traditionally important offices. In the Carter and Reagan White Houses, there were respectively a maximum of 11 and 15 Assistants to the President. There are now a maximum of 25 filled at any one time with seven assigned in the last year of the Obama administration to the Office of Chief of Staff. Having more than a quarter of the Assistants to the President assigned to the Chief's office means that other offices lose senior staff. Intergovernmental Affairs, for example, was not a top-level office in the Obama years nor was the Staff Secretary for part of that administration. In the Trump White House, both posts are at the Assistant to the President level. Generally, administrations have found that both offices are important for the management of decision-making and implementing policy at the ground level. While in the latter Obama years top level positions were concentrated near and around the Chief of Staff's office, the same was not true in the first six months of the Trump White House. Under Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, there were many staff entry points to the Oval Office with President Trump encouraging people to come in and Priebus having little control over who had access to the President.

5. There are partisan differences in how a White House is organized, particularly in the first year. Republicans are more likely to set up their White House with a hierarchical structure with clear lines of reporting. Democrats come in with a more horizontal White House staffing structure. They tighten up their ship a year or so in. The contrast is clear in a comparison of the Clinton 1993 chart with several senior people reporting directly to him and the one in 1996 where the Chief of Staff had all reporting to him. With an interest in gathering information from wherever he could, President Clinton set up a system that reflected his interest in hearing from everyone. After a year and a half (of a system where many staff had walk in privileges, Clinton brought in Leon Panetta who as Chief of Staff established a more disciplined system. The Trump White House is an outlier in the Republican model in the administration's early months with a President who encouraged his senior and sometimes deputy level staff to come in to the Oval Office without enforced access rules.

## **THE WHITE HOUSE STAFF**

6. A well-functioning White House has three types of offices requiring staff with particular experiences and expertise: policy, process, external relationships. First, presidents need substantive policy experts in the areas of foreign, domestic, economic, and national security policy. Second, just as important are the process offices – Staff Secretary, Office of Management and Administration, Presidential Personnel – that work on staff structure, staffing positions, decision-making, and policy implementation. Management is central to achieving policy goals and that means having these offices as frontline operations staffed by people who have the appropriate knowledge and management experience. Third, several White House offices are based on relationships with institutions and individuals outside of the White House. Legislative Affairs, Public Liaison, Intergovernmental Affairs, and the Press Office are keys to a President's effectively using available resources, which most works most effectively when the staff have credentials that include experience on the Hill, in lobbying operations, and working with news organizations. While presidents may have a different balance of where they concentrate



their senior staff among these three types of offices, most often they learn the importance of each to the success of their policy and political goals.

7. How and where to place campaign aides represents a challenge to every President setting up a White House staffing system. It is a challenge because those who campaigned for the President want to be in the White House, yet campaigning and governing call for different types of experiences and skills. Governing requires an ability to form shifting coalitions and a knowledge through inside experience of how to do so. But both presidents and their senior campaign staffs build relationships of trust and loyalty, which they want to maintain by having most of the key campaign political and policy people coming into the White House following the election. As presidents build Washington connections, though, they gradually bring into the White House people with governing talents and experience.
8. The most effective systems are those that blend five types of knowledge. Those are knowledge of: the President, the campaign, the rhythms of a White House, substantive policy expertise, and the Washington community, including Congress, the press, interest groups. That balance gives a President a decision-making system that reflects his interests, one that has a memory of what the campaign goals were, one that reflects a sense of how White Houses have most often operated, one that contains the substantive knowledge presidents need to develop and follow up on their policy goals, and one that incorporates a sense of the Washington world a President needs to work in in order to meet his policy needs.

## **THE PRESIDENT**

9. White House staffs most often mirror the strengths of a President and rarely fill in for the person's weaknesses. Presidents emphasize what they like and what they know. Building off his emphasis on communications, President Reagan had one of the strongest White House publicity operations in the modern presidency. President George H. W. Bush, who was particularly interested in foreign policy, but not communications, put a particular emphasis on redesigning a National Security Council operation under National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft. Most successor administrations used that model.

Equally important, the White House staff structure reflects what may be the weaknesses of presidents and the environment they are operating in. In the first six months of the Trump presidency, the White House staff structure captured the all-call nature of the President's Oval Office style. Trump enjoys having multiple people in his office and hearing from many voices. The result was an early White House structure with multiple senior aides reporting to the President without first going through the Chief of Staff. To a lesser extent, the same pattern of multiple people dealing directly with the President was true in the early Clinton administration. Soon he recognized the need to tighten access to the Oval Office and began developing a hierarchy that was complete when Leon Panetta came in as Chief of Staff.

Presidential words and actions can also upstage any well-laid organizational plans. Following the President Trump's tepid response to the death of a counter demonstrator and the wounding of others in an August demonstration countering a nationalist and Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, many business executives resigned from several of the councils, including the Trade and Manufacturing and the Strategic Development Group ones. As the numbers of executives resigning increased, the President disbanded those councils as well as one that was under construction, the National Infrastructure Council. Carl Icahn, who was acting as an unpaid consultant on regulatory reform also resigned his position. President Trump derailed his own organizational plans.

10. Presidents bring in with them the emphasis and the tools that got them to the White House. President Obama's mastery of digital strategies resulted in that campaign operation coming into the White House. In his reelection campaign, President George W. Bush had a strong rapid response operation, which he brought into the White House for his second term.

For President Trump, Twitter is an important aspect of how he communicates with his constituents. He used Twitter to establish a narrative for his campaign press coverage and, once he became President, he continued to tweet about his election victory, his critics, and his reaction to the cable television programs he watched in the morning. During a campaign with a set of attention-grabbing themes and operating with a slim budget, Donald Trump's tweets grabbed the attention of cable television news programs, so much so that there was little time to hear from his sixteen Republican competitors.

Once he got to the White House, the President continued his tweets, much to the consternation of many of his allies and to the delight of others. With a background and interest in television and publicity for himself and his ideas, Trump acted as his own communications director. His interest in developing and directing his communications worked during the campaign, but proved difficult for creating a consistent presidential narrative where the President and his staff had a coordinated message to deliver to the public. On several important occasions, such as in an interview with NBC's Lester Holt where the President discussed why he fired FBI director James Comey, the President contradicted what the Press Secretary and other senior aides had said. With many messages simultaneously coming out of the White House, a President who wants to direct his own communications, and the lowest presidential poll numbers in history for a President at the six-month mark (37% job approval in the Gallup poll), the Office of Communications has been under particular pressure. The administration has found it difficult to identify and then keep a Director of the Office of Communications. The position has had six announced directors: Jason Miller, Sean Spicer (twice), Michael Dubke, Anthony Scaramucci, and, on an interim basis, Hope Hicks, the current strategic communications assistant. Only Spicer and Dubke lasted more than two weeks in the position.

Staff turnover in a family-run business is easy to control compared to the task of assembling and maintaining a governing staff where power is divided between branches of government and where you have over two million civilian employees looking for presidential leadership. Trump's White House staff has divisions that have slowed the information and decision-making processes that go well beyond the communications area. Under President Trump, the top layer of White House staff has been uncharacteristically volatile with the senior positions in a fairly constant state of flux. There are approximately 25 people who hold the commissioned title of Assistant to the President and work at the highest salary level. In the Trump White House, there are a very sizeable number who either did not come into administration after being announced or who were fired or quit. Among those at the highest salary level who left the administration are: Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, Deputy Chief of Staff Katie Walsh, National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, Deputy National Security Advisor K. T. McFarland, Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, Press Secretary Sean Spicer, Anthony Scaramucci who was first announced as the Assistant to the President for Public

Liaison and Intergovernmental Affairs, but did not get that job. While Scaramucci did come into the White House, his tenure was brief. The Assistant to the President for Public Liaison, George Sifakis, left the White House in August. Josh Pitcock who served as Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff to the Vice President was replaced in July by Republican strategist Nick Ayres. Other commissioned officers at the Deputy Assistant and Special Assistants to the President levels left as well with several in the NSC exiting following a change in the National Security Advisor, but others leaving, among other reasons, for failed background checks, and being viewed as a person leaking information to reporters.

White House staff are critical to the success a President has and, at the same time, reflect his strengths and weaknesses. The challenge for a President is to assemble a staff that will serve his policy and political interests as well as fill in for his weaknesses. Once he has that staff in place, it is important to establish order, have a clear direction on initiatives and priorities, and then have an effective coordination system between the President, White House officials, and the other power centers in Washington, including the congressional leadership, party members, and the bureaucracy. Not an easy recipe to follow.

*CONTACT INFORMATION*

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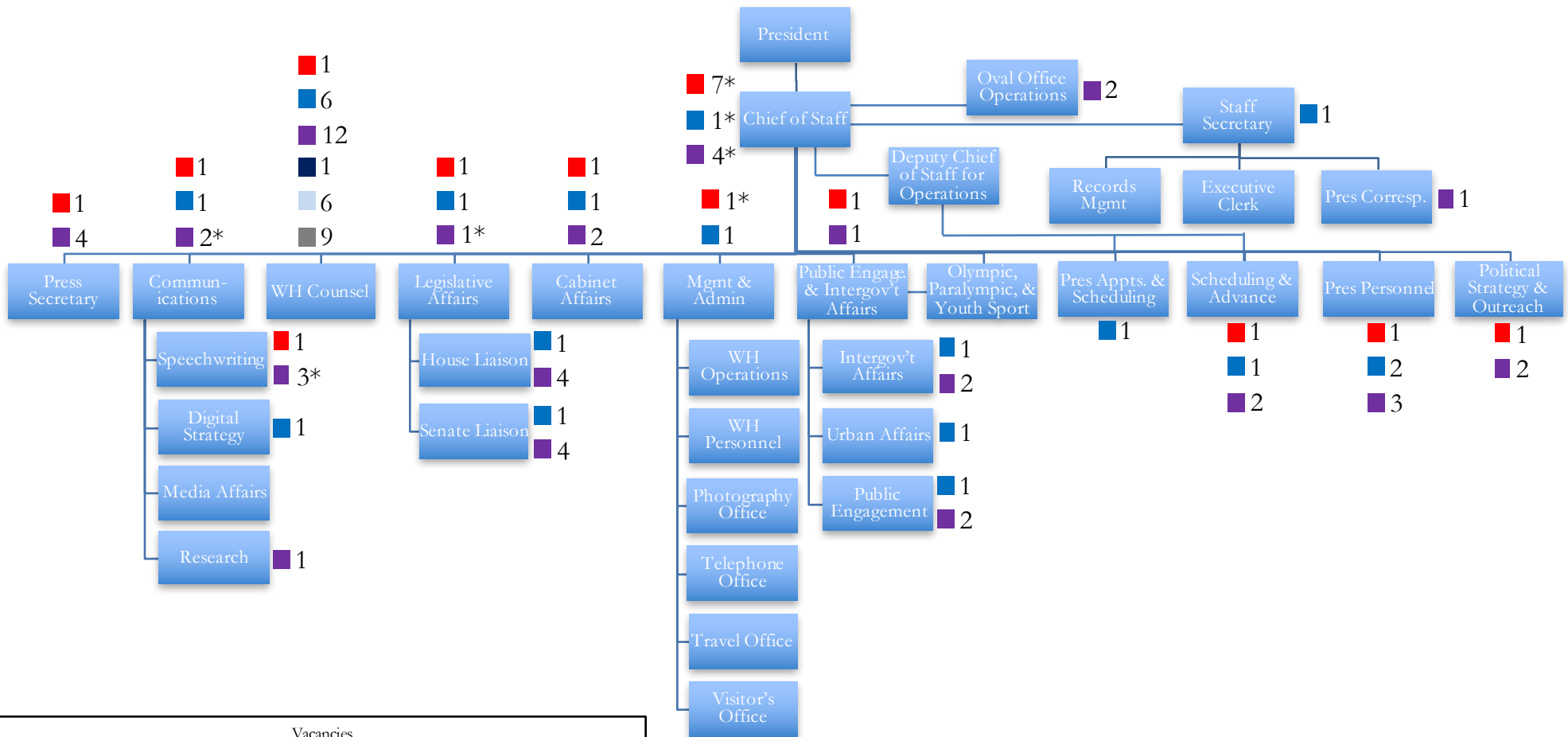
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**APPENDICES**

# Commissioned Officers and Similarly Titled Staff White House Office Barack Obama 2016

## Key

- Assistant to the President
- Deputy Assistant to the President
- Special Assistant to the President
- Senior Advisor to the President
- Counsel to the President
- Associate Counsel to the President
- Deputy Counsel to the President
- Special Counsel to the President
- Deputy Associate Counsel to the President
- Counselor to the President
- \* Vacant Position



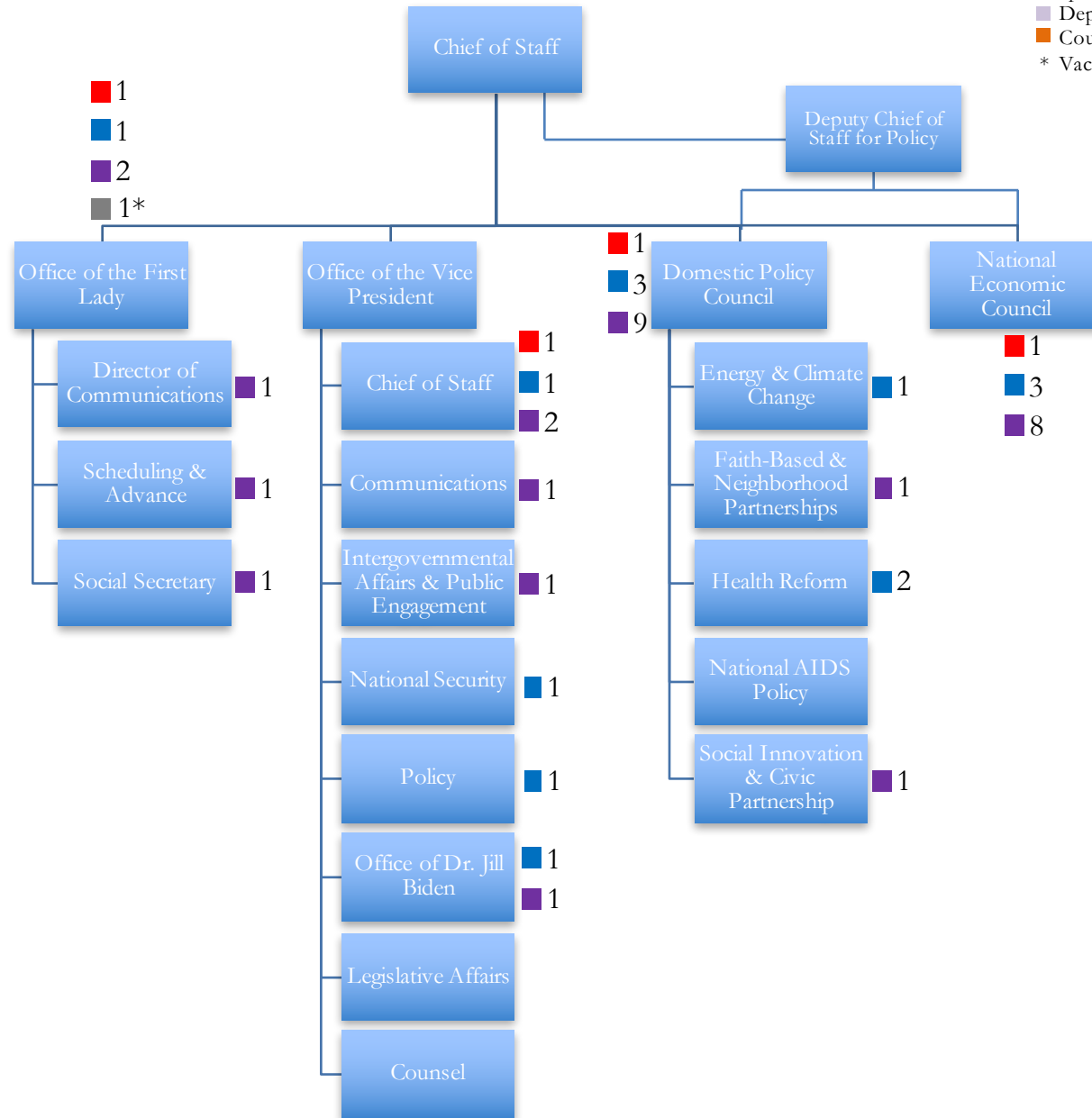
Vacancies

**Chief of Staff:** 3 Assistants; 1 Deputy; 2 Special Assistants  
**Communications:** 1 Special Assistant  
**Communications – Speechwriting:** 1 Special Assistant  
**White House Counsel:** 2 Deputies; 2 Special Assistants; 2 Deputy Counsels; 2 Associate Counsels  
**Legislative Affairs:** 1 Special Assistant  
**Management & Administration:** 1 Assistant

Commissioned Officers and Similarly Titled Staff  
 First Lady, Vice President, Domestic Policy Council, &  
 National Economic Council  
 Barack Obama  
 2016

**Key**

- Assistant to the President
- Deputy Assistant to the President
- Special Assistant to the President
- Senior Advisor to the President
- Counsel to the President
- Associate Counsel to the President
- Deputy Counsel to the President
- Special Counsel to the President
- Deputy Associate Counsel to the President
- Counselor to the President
- \* Vacant Position

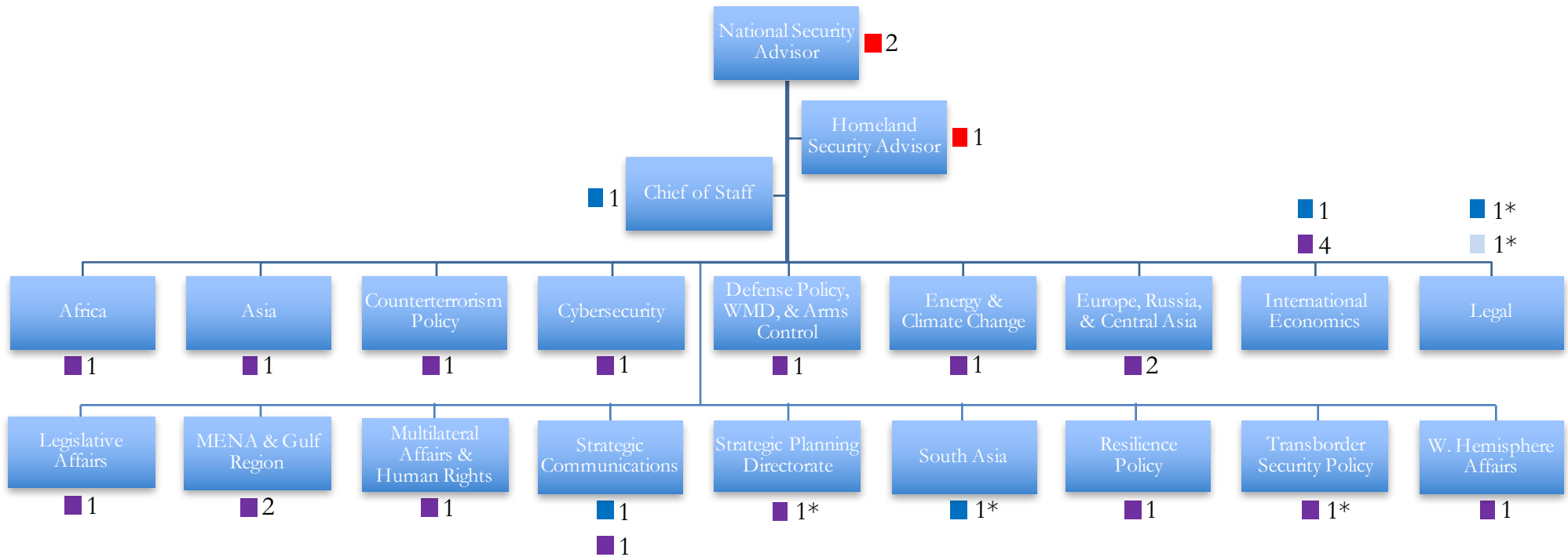


Vacancies  
 Office of the First Lady: 1 Associate Counsel

Commissioned Officers and Similarly Titled Staff  
 National Security Council  
 Barack Obama  
 2016

**Key**

- Assistant to the President
- Deputy Assistant to the President
- Special Assistant to the President
- Senior Advisor to the President
- Counsel to the President
- Associate Counsel to the President
- Deputy Counsel to the President
- Special Counsel to the President
- Deputy Associate Counsel to the President
- Counselor to the President
- \* Vacant Position



Vacancies  
**Legal:** 1 Deputy; 1 Associate Counsel  
**Strategic Planning Directorate:** 1 Special Assistant  
**South Asia:** 1 Deputy  
**Transborder Security Policy:** 1 Special Assistant