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Author(s): James P. Pfiffner

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The President's Chief of Staff: Lessons Learned

JAMES P. PFIFFNER

*Professor of Government and Public Policy
George Mason University*

Abstract

This paper argues that there are two firm lessons of White House organization that can be ignored by Presidents only at their own peril: no. 1, a chief of staff is essential in the modern White House; no. 2, a domineering chief of staff will almost certainly lead to trouble. After outlining the argument for the first lesson, the bulk of the paper is devoted to a detailed examination of the conduct of the chief of staff office by each of the four domineering chiefs of staff: Sherman Adams for Eisenhower, H. R. Haldeman for Nixon, Donald Regan for Reagan, and John Sununu for Bush. Each of these chiefs of staff resigned under a varying degree of pressure after considerable controversy. The paper concludes that the preferred role for a chief of staff is that of a facilitator, coordinator, and neutral broker.

At the superficial level a new President has a free hand in choosing how to organize the White House based on personal preference or management style. After all, the presidency is a very personal office. There are, however, two firm lessons of White House organization that can be ignored by Presidents only at their own peril.

Lesson Number One: A chief of staff is essential in the modern White House.

Lesson Number Two: A domineering chief of staff will almost certainly lead to trouble.

The bulk of this paper will be devoted to arguing for the second principle: a domineering or “strong” chief of staff will likely lead to disaster.¹ But first, the argument that a White House chief of staff is necessary will be outlined in order to put the second lesson into perspective.

Dwight Eisenhower was the first President to establish the office of chief of staff, and he designated Sherman Adams as the person to run his White House. But after Eisenhower John Kennedy decided to be his own chief of staff and had no one staffer whose scope of duties was comparable to the sweeping authority Adams had in the 1950s. Lyndon Johnson sporadically tried to organize his White House and designate a chief of staff, but he was unwilling to delegate sufficient authority and remained in charge of everything himself.

President Nixon increased the size of the White House staff and continued to centralize control because he distrusted the executive branch bureaucracy and even his own political appointees. H. R. Haldeman was his chief of staff and ran the White House with an iron hand. With Eisenhower and Nixon choosing to name a chief of staff and the two intervening Democrats choosing to act as their own, it still

seemed in 1976 that the issue of whether a chief of staff is necessary was an open one. But two trends had converged to preclude the option of operating the White House without a chief of staff. The White House office had grown to over 500 staffers, and control of domestic and foreign policy had been increasingly centralized in the White House.

When Gerald Ford took over, he reacted against Watergate by refusing to name a chief of staff and intended to run an open presidency. Ford first asked Donald Rumsfeld to join his White House staff, but he refused because Ford was unwilling to designate a chief of staff. But after a year of trying to run the White House by himself Ford concluded that his broader duties as President were suffering from the lack of a chief of staff. Ford called Rumsfeld again to ask him to join the administration, and Ford agreed to make him chief of staff in fact, though officially the “staff coordinator.”² When Rumsfeld was appointed Secretary of Defense, Richard Cheney became Ford’s chief of staff.

Jimmy Carter, also running against the specter of H. R. Haldeman and Watergate, wanted to be his own chief of staff and ignored the lessons that Ford had learned. But after two years of trying to manage the White House himself, Carter also admitted that his “spokes-of-the-wheel” approach of being his own chief of staff was not working and designated Hamilton Jordan to be his chief of staff. When Jordan left the White House to join the campaign, Jack Watson took over as chief of staff.

Thus Lesson Number One is that the President does not have a realistic option not to have some sort of chief of staff; the role is necessary in the modern White House.³ The chief of staff is necessary to perform a number of functions. Among them are included:⁴

1. Impose order on the policy process. The White House office is now so large that a President who tries to run it alone will soon be overwhelmed with managerial details to the neglect of broader responsibilities. A broad range of functions in domestic and foreign policy that used to be delegated to cabinet secretaries is now centralized in the White House.

2. Arbitrate among cabinet secretaries. Contemporary public policy issues are complex and usually cut across several departments. Cabinet secretaries are rivals over policy turf and will not cede coordination of policy to a peer. A chief of staff is needed to impose the President’s perspective on policy disputes among the departments and agencies.

3. Control access and play the heavy. Someone has to take on distasteful tasks for the President, such as controlling access, saying no to requests, and firing people. The chief of staff is the right person to be the “abominable no man” and also to act as a lightning rod by absorbing attacks meant for the President.

In sum, someone short of the President must be in charge of coordinating the White House. No president has successfully run the White House without a chief of staff since 1968, and since 1979 no President has tried.

But Lesson Number Two of White House organization is that a chief of staff who takes too domineering an approach to the position will lead to major problems.

There have been four domineering chiefs of staff in the modern presidency: Sherman Adams for Eisenhower, H. R. Haldeman for Nixon, Donald Regan for Reagan, and John Sununu for Bush. *Each* of these domineering chiefs of staff has resigned under a varying degree of pressure. The rest of this paper will examine the service of these strong chiefs of staff and come to the conclusion that the preferred role for a chief of staff is that of a facilitator, coordinator, and neutral broker. The best model for this role was James Baker in Ronald Reagan's first term, although Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Cheney, and Jack Watson took the facilitating approach to the chief of staff office before Baker.

Eisenhower Institutionalizes the White House

While FDR began the modern staffing system in the White House and Truman organized it more explicitly, it was under Eisenhower that the White House staff became institutionalized. Before he became President Dwight Eisenhower had the advantage of having been an executive for many years, directing U.S. forces during World War II, and having coordinated the allied effort to victory in the War. During his career he had given considerable thought to leadership in organizations and came to the presidency with firm ideas about how the White House should be organized. He was of the strong opinion that White House organization needed improving.

For years I had been in frequent contact with the executive office of the White House, and I had certain ideas about the system, or lack of system under which it operated. With my training in problems involving organization it was inconceivable to me that the work of the White House could not be better systemized than had been the case in the years I observed it.⁵

Eisenhower stressed the importance of organization: "Organization cannot make a genius out of an incompetent. . . . On the other hand, disorganization can scarcely fail to result in inefficiency and can easily lead to disaster."⁶ Thus Eisenhower organized his White House much more formally than either Truman or Roosevelt.

Eisenhower introduced a number of organizational innovations to the White House, among them were the offices of Cabinet Secretary and Staff Secretary and the upgrading of the staff director of the National Security Council to Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

But perhaps the most important and lasting contribution of Eisenhower to the organization of the presidency was the office of chief of staff whose function was to oversee and coordinate the much enlarged and more complex staff for the president. The combination of the powers of the office and the personality of its first occupant, Sherman Adams, made it the most powerful position short of the president in the government. Adams' official title was Assistant to the President, but his function was chief of staff. "I think of Adams as my Chief of Staff, but I don't call him that because the politicians think it sounds too military," admitted Eisenhower.⁷ Though Eisenhower never laid out in detail what Adams' duties were to be it was clear that

Adams was to be in charge of the White House. He told Adams that “The organization plan must make it plain to everybody that I am looking to you to coordinate this office.”⁸

Adams saw his job as making sure that staff work was complete and that any issues brought to the president were ripe for presidential involvement. According to Eisenhower: “A man like that is valuable because of the unnecessary detail he keeps away from the President. A President who doesn’t know how to decentralize will be weighed down with details and won’t have time to deal with the big issues.”⁹ Adams spent a considerable amount of time forcing reluctant cabinet secretaries to settle their disputes and turf battles short of the president. “Either you make up your minds or else tell me and I will do it. We must not bother the President with this. He is trying to keep the world from war.”¹⁰ As Adams explained his role, “Eisenhower simply expected me to manage a staff that would boil down, simplify, and expedite the urgent business . . . and keep as much work of secondary importance off his desk as possible.”¹¹ Adams had within his jurisdiction most domestic matters that came to the President and he spent a good portion of his time on political appointments. He did not have clear policy preferences of his own and did not act as a policy advocate within the White House system, though Republican conservatives regarded him as suspiciously moderate.

Much of Adams’ power stemmed from his control of access to the president. Given Eisenhower’s preference to be spared details, his absence from the White House much of the time, and his conscious decision to stay behind the scenes, Adams’ position became that much more powerful. Despite organization charts and official policy that gave direct access to the president to all cabinet officers and a number of White House staffers, the reality was that Adams usually had final say as to who would see the president and what papers would reach him. Adams once said in response to a question about cabinet access to the president: “What you say about shielding people from the President [sic] is essentially correct. Anybody who had legitimate business of sufficient importance to occupy the attention of the President got in; those that didn’t didn’t. *I knew the difference.*”¹² Cabinet members were correct in blaming Adams for enforcing tight control of access to the President. This was the source of much of the resentment of Adams.

The tightness of Adams’ control can be contrasted with Adams’ successor as chief of staff, General Jerry Persons, who reported that he allowed more people to see Eisenhower than Adams had and gave him more details than had Adams.¹³ But controlling access was only one of the important roles that Adams played for the president as chief of staff. He took the heat for the president for tough political decisions, such as firing people and negotiating political patronage. He acted as a buffer for the President and organized the White House and Cabinet with an iron hand. After Eisenhower’s first heart attack in 1955 Adams ran the executive branch virtually by himself for several months.

These are all legitimate and often necessary roles for the chief of staff but the way they are handled can make a large difference. They can be done in a heavy handed manner or they can be accomplished with a firm hand, but without overt hostility.

Cabinet members and staff may chafe under the decision in either case, but hostility and ill feeling will result if the bearer of the bad news is gratuitously rude also. Although Adams ran the White House the way Eisenhower wanted, his tight control and personal style contributed to his eventual undoing.

Adams' downfall began when it became public in June of 1958 that a textile manufacturer and old friend of Adams, Bernard Goldfine, had on several occasions requested that Adams determine the status of charges against him with federal regulatory agencies. Adams made the calls for Goldfine from the White House to find out the status of the cases but did not suggest any change in agency actions. While the calls in themselves may have been free of improper intent, the very fact that an official of Adams' status, power, and proximity to the president was making the call cannot help but to be taken seriously by any agency in the government. Adams did not seem to be sensitive to the implications or appearance of his calls.

Adams became doubly vulnerable when it was disclosed in congressional hearings that he had accepted gifts from Goldfine who had paid for hotel rooms for Adams and had given his wife a vicuna coat and an oriental rug.¹⁴ Despite Adams' protestations that he had also given gifts to Goldfine in the context of their friendship, the combination of gifts to Adams with the inquiries from the White House appeared too much like official actions in exchange for gifts.

The charges were given added weight because in the 1952 elections the Republicans had severely criticized the Democrats for instances of corruption in the Truman Administration. Several of Truman's aides had been fired for accepting financial and other goods while in office. Republicans had promised the electorate that they would "clean up the mess in Washington" and that their administration would be "clean as a hound's tooth." Adams proudly wore the badge of righteousness and had swiftly moved to censure and fire members of the administration who had been tainted by any hint of impropriety. The irony of Adams being hoist on his own petard was too much for his political enemies to resist.

The publication of these actions, while serious in themselves, might not have led to disaster, but in combination with other aspects of Adams' personality ultimately led to his resignation. The first of these factors has already been mentioned: Adams' tight control of access to the President. People resented it even though the President wanted it that way. The public image of Adams was that he was virtually running the presidency by himself. This was an exaggerated perception and was part of Eisenhower's conscious decision to exercise his power behind the scenes, but the popular image rang true to many Americans.¹⁵ One current joke had it that it would be unfortunate if Eisenhower died and Nixon became president but a disaster if Adams died and Eisenhower was forced to be president.

An additional important cause of Adams' downfall was his personal rudeness to colleagues and others he dealt with on an official basis. To Eisenhower, Adams' curtness was merely his way of communicating in the most efficient manner, ". . . he never added a word to his 'yes' or 'no' if such an answer sufficed. It never occurred to him to say 'Hello'. . . . For Sherman Adams this was neither bad manners nor pretense; he was busy. Absorbed in his work, he had no time to waste."¹⁶ But to

others the lack of the usual elements of common courtesy and civility were perceived as his disdain for them as fellow workers and human beings. He seldom said “hello” or “goodby” on the phone and would not say “good morning” when he came to the office. Adams once explained: “Why should I say hello? They know I’m here.”¹⁷

While Adams’ brusqueness did not bother his boss, it often did bother his subordinates and others he dealt with. Adams’ habitual harshness frequently reduced his secretaries to tears, and at one time he allegedly had five of them crying at the same time.¹⁸ Adams treated members of the Cabinet and Congress the same way, feeling no need for the usual amenities of human communication. This did not endear him to many, and when he was in trouble and needed friends to defend him, few were willing to come forth. Many in Congress and the executive branch felt that he was an arrogant, power-hungry tyrant who was getting his just deserts.

Particularly damaging to Adams’ ability to weather the storm about his supposed corruption was his alienation of the Republican leadership in Congress who were put off by his arrogance. But GOP conservatives also saw him as biased against their policies and sympathetic to the liberal wing of the party. Congressional Republicans were afraid that in the upcoming congressional elections that the Democrats would use the Adams issue to make gains at the polls and defeat Republican candidates. The coup de grace came when Republican leaders informed Eisenhower that campaign contributors would not open up their purses until Adams was gone.¹⁹

Even a personal plea and vote of confidence from Eisenhower could not save Adams. After Adams’ congressional testimony in which he argued that he had done nothing wrong, Eisenhower said “I believe that the presentation made by Governor Adams to the Congressional Committee yesterday truthfully represents the pertinent facts. I personally like Governor Adams. I admire his abilities. I respect him because of his personal and official integrity. I need him.”²⁰ But the plea was seen more as a weakness on the part of Eisenhower than an effective defense of Adams. Finally Adams was persuaded to resign.

A further irony concerning Adams’ moral stature was made public by *The New York Times* columnist William Safire in 1986 upon Adams’ death. Safire, who had worked with Adams in the 1952 New Hampshire primary, reported that IRS investigators had found that Adams had not reported over \$300,000 in income. At the request of former President Eisenhower, President Johnson told the IRS not to prosecute Adams, and the taxes were eventually paid by a fund set up by Adams’ friends.²¹

Nixon’s Tight Hierarchy

When Richard Nixon returned to the White House after serving as Eisenhower’s Vice President and observing the Kennedy/Johnson years, he resolved that his administration would be more formally organized than the Democrats had been and closer in tone to Eisenhower’s. Nixon began his term with intentions of delegating authority to his cabinet secretaries to select their own subordinates and to accomplish the goals of his administration. He would spend much of his time on international affairs; in domestic policy he would take only the big plays. In May

1968 Nixon declared:

For one thing, I would disperse power, spread it among able people. Men operate best only if they are given the chance to operate at full capacity.

I would operate differently from President Johnson. Instead of taking all power to myself, I'd select cabinet members who could do their jobs, and each of them would have the stature and the power to function effectively. Publicity would not center at the White House alone. Every key official would have the opportunity to be a big man in his field. On the other hand, when a President takes all the real power to himself, those around him become puppets. They shrivel up and become less and less creative. . . . your most creative people can't develop in a monolithic, centralized power set-up.²²

Nixon's initial intentions were echoed by H. R. Haldeman: "Our job is not to do the work of government, but to get the work out to where it belongs—out to the Departments."²³ Nixon's intentions were reflected in his selection of cabinet secretaries of stature and independent political standing and a White House staff that included the disparate viewpoints of liberal Patrick Moynihan and conservative Arthur Burns.

But disillusionment soon set in. Nixon found that the Democratically controlled Congress was not about to give him what he wanted, and he shifted to an administrative strategy to accomplish his goals. He would use all of his tools of the executive branch at his disposal. Nixon became convinced that a wide array of forces were intent upon frustrating his aims. The Congress would not pass his proposals, the media were critically hostile, and the career bureaucracy would drag their collective feet and sabotage his policies. He even came to the conclusion that his own appointees in the executive departments had "gone native" and become more concerned with their own power and standing in their policy areas than in carrying out his priorities.

He decided to rein in the departments and agencies and created several mechanisms to facilitate White House control. Thus instead of getting the work of the administration out to the departments and agencies, Nixon decided to bring the work of the departments and agencies into the White House where he could carefully control policy development and oversee implementation.

Nixon's concept of the presidency was that the executive branch ought to be at his disposal. As John Ehrlichman put it: "There shouldn't be a lot of leeway in following the President's policies. It should be like a corporation, where the executive vice presidents (the Cabinet officers) are tied closely to the chief executive, or to put it in extreme terms, when he says jump, they only ask how high."²⁴

As Nixon became disillusioned with the executive branch he gave correspondingly greater power to his White House staff. The role of the staff came to be to buffer the President and to protect his time so that he could read, write, and ponder the big picture. In Nixon's words, "My disposition is to see that the President's time is not frittered away. I've found a way to do it. I'm a reader, not a buller."²⁵ Nixon's preference for time alone reinforced the tendency of the White House staff to guard access to him. The line between protecting the President's time and isolating the

President became a fine one. According to Henry Kissinger, Nixon usually made decisions “in solitude on the basis of memoranda or with a few very intimate aides. He abhorred confronting colleagues with whom he disagreed . . . and he shunned persuading or inspiring his subordinates. He would decide from inside his self-imposed cocoon. . . . All this led to a vicious circle in which the President withdrew ever more into his isolation and pulled the central decisions increasingly into the White House.”²⁶

From the beginning Nixon had wanted a chief of staff to run his White House, and the role came naturally to H. R. Haldeman, a brilliant and hard nosed organizer who had been with Nixon since his 1960 campaign for the presidency. To the rest of the executive branch and the outside world Nixon seemed isolated behind his “Berlin Wall” of Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Kissinger. “The White House became an echo chamber that magnified the voice of the president but sacrificed true pitch.”²⁷

Haldeman was the lynchpin in the White House staff system. He became the most powerful White House aide since Sherman Adams and ran the system with an iron hand. He clearly took precedence over the other staffers. “We all knew where we fit. There were five of us that were equal, but as [Bryce] Harlow said: there was a first among equals, and it was clearly me. Nobody questioned it. I never asserted it; I never argued it. I never had to.”²⁸ According to Haldeman, “If I told someone to do something, he knew it wasn’t me—he knew exactly what it was; it was an order from the President. They knew an appeal wouldn’t get anywhere.”²⁹

His role, as he saw it, was to institute a “zero defects system” in the staffing operation. He would ensure that all issues and options for the President were fully “staffed out” and that all bases had been touched. Access to the President by anyone except Kissinger was carefully controlled by Haldeman, and cabinet members frequently resented his gatekeeping. When cabinet secretaries actually did get in to see the President, Haldeman would be present to take notes, and the agenda for the meeting would often be presented to the president in such a way as to determine the outcome to the staff’s satisfaction but not the visitor’s.³⁰

He controlled the paper flow and White House staffing. There was a follow-up system that would impose deadlines for staff projects. As the deadline approached the staffer or his secretary would be reminded, and if the work was not ready or of unacceptable quality, increasingly heavy handed reminders would hound the person until the work was completed to Haldeman’s satisfaction.

The ostensible purpose of the tightly run system was to save the President from non-presidential details so that he could concentrate on the big picture. The irony was that despite the time that Nixon reserved for thinking great thoughts, he was obsessed with details of the White House operation, both of substance and style. He was concerned with White House furniture, who had what photographs of former presidents in the Executive Office Building, and he wanted extensive memos to him on what wines would be served at White House functions. He had White House staffers log the comments visitors made on the paintings displayed in the west lobby and he kept careful inventory of small gifts (cuff links, ash trays, and copies of *Six Crises*) that were given out to visitors about the White House. There were many memoranda about the White House tennis courts.³¹

Although the Watergate scandals were not caused by the staffing system, both Watergate and the staff organization were reflections of Nixon's psychology and character. Despite the fact that Haldeman was close enough to the President to occasionally delay implementation of questionable off-the-cuff orders and demands by an irritated Nixon there was never any question or doubt in the White House about covering up the initial Watergate break-in. The tone was set by Nixon, and the staff unquestioningly carried out his wishes. The problem was that Haldeman and the staff system he set up faithfully reflected and reinforced Nixon's dark side and need for isolation. Thus the zero-defects system allowed the Watergate "horrors" and led to the resignations and convictions of top White House staffers and the unprecedented resignation of a U.S. President.

Reagan's Contrasting Chiefs

As it is with all presidents, the shape and role of the White House staff was a reflection of Ronald Reagan's personality. By all accounts, both friendly and critical, Reagan was extremely passive in his approach to the White House staff. He was not passive with respect to the major direction of his presidency or public policy; his was an active presidency. But once the direction was set by Reagan, his aides formulated the policies and carried them out; Reagan was interested only in outcomes and did not want to be bothered with details.

Part of his passiveness was his lack of intellectual curiosity, but part of it was due to his uncritical trust in whatever people told him or what he read.³² This passiveness made him dependent on his staff who had to make sure he was not unduly influenced by the most recent person he saw.³³ Donald Regan recalled, "I cannot remember a single case in which he changed a time or canceled an appointment or ever complained about an item on his schedule."³⁴

Reagan's hands-off approach to his staff was based on a management philosophy that relied on delegation of authority. In his words: "Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere as long as the policy you've decided upon is being carried out."³⁵ This approach occasionally frustrated administration officials because of Reagan's unwillingness to give them policy guidance. Donald Regan complained: "In the four years that I served as Secretary of the Treasury I never saw President Reagan alone and never discussed economic philosophy. . . . I had to figure these things out like any other American, by studying his speeches and reading the newspapers. . . . After I accepted the job, he simply hung up and vanished." Reagan "laid down no rules and articulated no missions" and thus conferred great "latitude on his subordinates."³⁶ To David Stockman, Reagan "seemed so serene and passive," "He gave no orders, no commands; asked for no information; expressed no urgency. . . . Since I *did* know what to do, I took his quiet message of confidence to be a mandate."³⁷ Stockman observed that whenever there was an argument Reagan would smile and say: "Okay, you fellas work it out."³⁸

Reagan's passivity and penchant for delegation made his staff crucial to his presidency in a way that was not true of Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, or George Bush. The unique division of labor in his first term worked in a particularly

felicitous way for Reagan. The definition of staff roles began before the inauguration, immediately after the election when the decisions were made about the structure and organization of the top staff. The outcome was driven by the widespread expectation that Edwin Meese, who had run the campaign, headed the transition, and had run Reagan's Governor's office in California, would naturally be named Reagan's White House chief of staff. But others around Reagan judged that Meese, though unquestionably loyal and ideologically dedicated, did not have the organizational talent or discipline to perform well as chief of staff.

Reagan must be given credit for accepting their advice that he needed a Washington insider for his chief of staff and saying no to the loyal Meese, despite Baker's work for George Bush in 1976 and 1980. In order to get Meese to go along with the plan, he had to be convinced that he would still play a major role in the administration. This task was accomplished by a memo initialed by both Baker and Meese that divided up the responsibilities of the two advisers. On the surface, the division was heavily slanted toward Meese, giving him jurisdiction over administration policy, both foreign and domestic. Meese was to have the title of "Counselor to the President for Policy" along with cabinet rank and was to participate in all meetings of the full cabinet. He was in charge of "coordination and supervision" of the domestic policy staff and the National Security Council.³⁹ Thus Meese was given a very wide range of responsibilities indeed. What was left for Baker?

Baker was to get the formal title of chief of staff and the traditional process and staffing powers of that position. He was given control over "Coordination and supervision of White House Staff functions," "Hiring and firing authority over all elements of White House Staff," "Coordination and control of all in and out paper flow to the President and of presidential schedule and appointments," and he was to "Preside over meetings of White House Staff." Baker also claimed the traditional Chief of Staff office in the West Wing. An addition, written in longhand, assured that both Meese and Baker had the right to "attend any meeting which Pres. attends — w/ his consent."⁴⁰

On the surface Meese had a huge advantage, with cabinet participation and control of foreign and domestic policy. The memo was written so that Baker received no substance and all process.⁴¹ But in the White House process often determines policy outcomes, especially with as detached a President as Ronald Reagan, and thus Baker had the advantage over Meese in the administration's policy deliberations.

As chief of staff Baker hired skilled Washington insiders to help him, and he orchestrated the Administration's policy agenda for the first term. He did not seek complete control over access to the president, sharing it with Meese and Deaver and he exercised his power in a subtle rather than a heavy handed way. With his reputation for pragmatism that invoked the suspicion of the ideological reaganites, he was careful to keep open his lines of communication to the right wing of the Republican party, and he assiduously maintained his ties to members of Congress. He was accessible to and trusted by the press and often received favorable news coverage which he used to the administration's advantage. He thus was attentive to the major constituencies that Reagan would need in order to accomplish his agenda. Richard Darman became staff secretary and controlled paper flow to the Oval Office.

Michael Deaver, the third member of the Troika, had been with Reagan for many years in California and had an almost filial relationship with both Nancy and Ronald Reagan. Deaver became Deputy Chief of Staff, but he was not concerned as much with the substance of policy as with the staging of the President and his presentation to the public.⁴² He concerned himself with everything that affected Ronald Reagan as a person: his comfort, his schedule, the backdrops for his political actions, etc. Perhaps most importantly, Deaver was the primary link to the East Wing, that is, Nancy Reagan. He would convey her wishes, either explicitly or as his own ideas, to the West Wing staffers. Baker appreciated the importance of Mrs. Reagan and was careful to accommodate her wishes.

Nancy Reagan was not active in policy across the board, but she selectively inserted her views very effectively when she felt that the President's person or reputation was at stake. Several times this affected foreign policy and quite often staffing decisions; she played a role in the resignations of cabinet secretaries James Watt, Raymond Donovan, Edwin Meese, and a number of White House staffers, including Donald Regan.⁴³

The White House was to change drastically in Reagan's second term with large scale changes of personnel at the top. Despite the 1986 tax reform, there were no sweeping victories comparable to the economic agenda of 1981, and the administration slid into the disaster of the Iran-Contra scandal. The second term troubles were due, in no small part, to the change in chiefs of staff. Treasury Secretary Donald Regan and chief of staff James Baker decided to exchange jobs, and characteristically, Regan, Baker, Deaver, and Nancy Reagan had agreed upon the switch before it was presented to Regan. Characteristically, Regan agreed to the staff decision with no questions.

When Regan came in to run the White House he had several personal priorities. He wanted to do away with the collegial staffing arrangement of the first term which he felt led to staff conflict and leaks, which it did. He also wanted to make some personnel changes, but most importantly he wanted to "let Reagan be Reagan."

Regan's personal style and career suggested that he would take a different approach to running the White House than had James Baker. Regan had been an officer in the Marines and was used to being CEO of Merrill Lynch. "When I was chief executive and I said, 'Jump,' people asked, 'How high?' As Secretary of the Treasury, when I said, 'Jump,' people said, 'What do you mean by jump? What do you mean by high?'"⁴⁴ According to one of Regan's aides, "He considers the Executive Branch to be like a corporation. Cabinet members are vice presidents, the President is the chairman of the board, the chief of staff is the chief operating officer."⁴⁵ Regan was used to being a principal and did not easily slide into a staff role.

Whereas Baker had brought strong subordinates to work with him, Regan would brook no rivals for influence. The staffers he brought from his days at the Treasury Department were known around the White House as "the Mice" because of their meek approach to their boss. According to White House staffers Regan's personal staff aides were "almost obsequious and scared stiff of him."⁴⁶ A former colleague of Regan said: "His weakness is that his ego was so strong he did not pick good subordinates. Or if they were, he broke them. He couldn't stand the competition."⁴⁷

At the same time that Regan was establishing himself as chief of staff other strong advisers to the President were leaving the White House. Baker and Meese were taking cabinet positions; Deaver was leaving the White House to be a lobbyist; Darman left with Baker; David Stockman was on his way to Wall Street. Max Friedersdorf and Ed Rollins stayed for a while in the second term, but soon left.

Regan's determination to "let Reagan be Reagan," led him to think that his own lack of strong policy preferences was a guarantee that he was serving the president's goals and no one else's. But to best serve the President the White House staff must compensate for his weaknesses. In this case the President's weakness was his passivity and not being willing to search out alternatives on his own. This placed the responsibility on the staff to assure that contrasting views were brought to the President's attention. In the first term this was assured, despite the staff's intentions to protect the President from conflict, because the rivalries among the staff and the struggle between conservatives and moderates could not be entirely suppressed.

Reinforcing the President's conviction that many policy problems were simple was another consequence of "letting Reagan be Reagan," but this was not a favor to the President. In criticizing Regan, David Stockman called this "the echo principle" and argued that it shielded Reagan from hard economic realities.⁴⁸ According to Richard Darman, one of the advantages of the first term conflictual triumvirate was that the President was forced to face up to some complex realities. "Seeing the interplay between us, a lot of things happened. First of all, Ronald Reagan learned much more about reality."⁴⁹

But Don Regan did his best to stifle this safety valve of White House conflict. He dominated the White House, controlling access to the President, scheduling, paper flow, public appearances, appointments, and phone calls. He also, unlike other strong chiefs of staff, attempted to assert control over national security policy. But Regan's heavy handed attempt to control everything became too much. Long time Reagan intimate Stuart Spencer observed that Regan "became a prime minister, he became a guy that was in every photo op, he wasn't watching the shop. And he surrounded himself with yes people. Those were all signs of weakness to me."⁵⁰ Regan's control of the White House was so tight and his demands of subservience so great that a joke circulating around the White House held that Regan was going to resign to become a Catholic Cardinal. The White House staffers' response was: that's good, now we'll only have to kiss his ring.⁵¹

Contrary to the Brownlowian admonition to have a passion for anonymity, Regan sought the limelight, and was constantly trying to get into photographs with the President that would appear in the newspapers. The most egregious example of this was the official photograph of Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev at the Geneva Summit. The White House photo showed the two leaders sitting on a couch with Don Regan behind them leaning forward as if he were the orchestrator of their agreement. Regan, who as chief of staff made the final decision, insisted that this be the only photo of the summit agreement released by the White House.⁵²

In "letting Reagan be Reagan" Regan acted as if the President were his only constituent. He did not seem to realize that in order to serve the President effectively

a chief of staff needs to cultivate other constituencies, especially Congress and the press. Regan soon alienated members of Congress with his disdain for Congress as an institution and his distaste for politics. He antagonized the press because of his heavy handed attempts to control leaks and his hostility over unfavorable coverage of the administration. Unlike Baker, he acted as if he did not realize that the press “serves as a bulletin board” upon which Washington insiders post notices, and use it to his (and his President’s) advantage.⁵³

Regan had other drawbacks as chief of staff. According to David Stockman he had an “insatiable ego” that led him to want to take public credit for the Administration’s victories and to be jealous when others got favorable press coverage. “I had always wished Regan would stop blaming me for being inadvertently more conspicuous than he.”⁵⁴ According to Nancy Reagan, Regan liked the sound of “chief” but not the sound of “staff.”⁵⁵ Nor did Regan care much for Nancy. “Mrs. Reagan regarded herself as the President’s alter ego . . . as if the office that had been bestowed upon her husband by the people somehow fell into the category of worldly goods covered by the marriage vows.”⁵⁶ He also resented the influence of Nancy’s astrologer on the management of the presidency. “Virtually every major move and decision the Reagans made during my time as White House Chief of Staff was cleared in advance with a woman in San Francisco who drew up horoscopes to make certain that the planets were in a favorable alignment for the enterprise.”⁵⁷ At times the President’s schedule would have to be changed at the last minute or set for precise timing at the behest of Joan Quigley, the Reagans’ astrologer.⁵⁸

Regan, like other strong chiefs of staff, seemed to think that all criticisms of him were attestations to his role as buffer for the President. “If someone gets a cold in this town, I get blamed,” he asserted.⁵⁹ “One of the reasons I’ve gained so much prominence is because of the blame coming my way. It’s kind of nice for the President to be able to lay the blame off and say: ‘I didn’t do it, it was somebody down the line.’ There’s nothing wrong with that as long as it goes two ways. Remember when things go right that maybe Regan had something to do with it, however little.”⁶⁰

But Regan wasn’t always willing to take the heat for administration failures. After the disclosure of the administration’s dealings with Iran, and the failed Reykjavik summit, Regan tried to distance himself from the embarrassment. “Some of us are like a shovel brigade that follow [sic] a parade down Main Street cleaning up. We took Reykjavik and turned what was really a sour situation into something that turned out pretty well.”⁶¹ What is troublesome about this statement is that Regan is shifting blame for administration embarrassments away from himself and toward the person who was in charge of U.S. performance at the Reykjavik Summit: President Reagan. The strong implication here is that Regan presented himself as cleaning up after the President made a mess of things. This public shifting of blame to the president is unacceptable for a White House staffer.

The final straw in Regan’s term as chief of staff was the Report of the Tower Commission. Despite the fact that Regan denied that he had any control over foreign policy, the Tower Commission held him responsible for part of the Iran-Contra disaster. According to Brent Scowcroft, Regan claimed to have jurisdiction over

foreign policy advice to the President. “He kept saying he did. One of the reasons McFarlane quit was because Regan wanted McFarlane to report through him.”⁶²

The Tower Board that investigated the Iran-Contra scandal did not accept Regan’s denials. Although it did not conclude that Regan participated in the scandal or the cover-up, it did hold him responsible for allowing it to happen on his watch. In citing the “failure of responsibility” the Board pointed out that ultimate responsibility for the White House staff system belongs to the President, but that Regan was partially responsible for the disaster. “More than almost any Chief of Staff of recent memory, he asserted personal control over the White House staff and sought to extend this control to the National Security Advisor. He was personally active in national security affairs and attended almost all of the relevant meetings regarding the Iran initiative. . . . He must bear primary responsibility for the chaos that descended upon the White House when such disclosure did occur.”⁶³

After resisting as long as he could and after much prodding from his wife and other intimates, the President asked for Regan’s resignation, but agreed to wait until several days after the release of the Tower Report as a face saving gesture. But the coup de grace was administered by Nancy immediately after release of the Report when it was leaked to the press from her office that Howard Baker would be Reagan’s new chief of staff. As soon as he heard of the press announcement, Regan immediately resigned.⁶⁴

After the resignation on February 27, 1987 Regan’s problems were summed up by a former Reagan White House staffer:

Don never realized that while Wall Street runs one way; Pennsylvania Avenue is a two-way street. He never realized there is a difference between being an elected and an appointed official. He never realized the distinction between being a staff person and the chief executive officer. He never realized that the White House demands talent throughout, rather than talent derived. He never realized his job was to compensate for the perceived strengths and weaknesses of others, rather than to dominate those weaknesses.⁶⁵

Bush’s Pit Bull

George Bush recruited a competent White House staff marked by professionalism and a low visibility approach to White House service. The best in White House staff service was exemplified by Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, who had filled the same role in the Ford Administration. Scowcroft was tireless in his service to Bush, and often provided a personal sounding board to Bush’s thoughts about foreign affairs. Another model White House staffer was Roger Porter who had served in the Ford and Reagan administrations and was given responsibility for domestic and economic policy staff coordination in the Bush White House. He provided experience, expertise, and sound policy analysis without engaging in public disputes over policy or status or trying to strong arm members of the cabinet.

Bush’s White House staff did not tend to interpose themselves between the President and cabinet secretaries or have major fights with the cabinet departments

because Bush knew his cabinet well, and unlike Reagan, made it a habit to keep in touch with them. So Bush's White House had no major ego problems or conflicts with the cabinet, with one major exception: his Chief of Staff, John Sununu.

In order to understand why John Sununu was chosen by Bush to be chief of staff, it is helpful to recall the desperation of Bush's political situation after the Iowa caucuses in the Republican primaries of 1988. Bush had just come in third behind Senator Robert Dole and evangelist Pat Robertson. New Hampshire had always been a rock-ribbed conservative state and a key to the Republican nomination, and Bush's conservative credentials were somewhat suspect.

But John Sununu had a plan. When an aide began to commiserate with him about the disaster of Bush's third place finish in Iowa, Sununu explained how the situation was in fact an opportunity. "Don't you see how much good I'm going to be able to do for the next President of the United States?"⁶⁶ Sununu then took the offensive in calling in every favor he had earned while he was governor of New Hampshire and designed a media blitz that helped Bush win. The strategy centered around having the Vice President "take the pledge" of "no new taxes" while television spots bashed Senator Dole as "senator straddle" by charging that he might consider a tax increase as one element of an attempt to shrink the deficit.⁶⁷ The strategy worked, and Bush went on to win New Hampshire and the nomination without any serious difficulties.

Hints of future problems arose after the election in the maneuvering over how the Bush White House would be organized. After reportedly turning down two cabinet positions and insisting on the chief of staff slot, Sununu began to define his future role in press interviews. In an interview with *The Boston Globe* Sununu gave the impression that he would play the role of a strong chief of staff by being a "strong doorkeeper," a "tough critic" of OMB's budget before the President saw it, and the setter of the daily White House agenda. Sununu was also fighting publicly over the possible role of Robert M. Teeter, who was offered the position of deputy chief of staff, but whose relationship with Bush would have guaranteed him a strong voice in the White House. The problem for Teeter, and probably why he decided to decline a job in the administration, was that Sununu insisted that Teeter not be allowed into the Oval Office to see the President alone.⁶⁸

This jockeying for position in public and fighting over access to the president before he even took office or made his own decisions about White House organization was unseemly and provided early warnings about how Sununu would conduct the office of chief of staff. Of course maneuvering for position always occurs during a presidential transition, but the Meese-Baker negotiations were less acrimonious and were not fought out in public.

President Bush, who had a chief of staff as Vice President (Craig Fuller), clearly wanted a chief to organize the White House and coordinate policy development. And Sununu performed well many of the traditional chief of staff roles. He made the trains run on time. He was the enforcer with respect to White House staffers, the Cabinet, and Congress. He fired people. He took the heat for unpopular decisions.

Sununu presided over the senior staff meeting every day at 7:30 AM in the

Roosevelt Room in White House. Typically he spent from 8 to 9:30 AM in the Oval Office with the President for the national security briefing and setting priorities for the day and ended the day with the President from 4:30 to 5 PM. During the day he would see the president about 10 times and would spend a total of 35–45 percent of the day with the President.⁶⁹

One common mistake of chiefs of staff that Sununu did not make was to reinforce a presidential weakness as had Haldeman and Regan before him. He provided a sharp contrast in personal style to the President. He was the President's "pit bull" dog who would act mean and allow the President to take the "kinder and gentler" stance. Sununu, unlike the three previous strong chiefs of staff, had firm ideological convictions and advocated his own policy preferences. But what would ordinarily be a major drawback in a chief of staff worked to the President's advantage in this case. Sununu was more conservative politically than the President and was willing to play a highly visible role as keeper of the conservative flame and representative of the conservative wing of the Republican Party in the White House. This was useful for Bush when Sununu would stake out a very conservative position, for instance on environmental policy, and let the president take a more moderate stance, thus reassuring conservatives their interests were being represented in the White House while letting the president still claim to be "the environmental president."

The danger of a chief of staff who is also a policy advocate is that advice to the President might be skewed to favor the chief of staff's favored outcome. The other common danger of a strong chief of staff is that access to the President will be constricted to a trickle. But neither of these potential pitfalls was a danger to George Bush. He knew enough about the policy issues himself to be able to discount the bias of his staff. And his personal style assured that he would not become isolated, even though Sununu did control access to the Oval Office. The danger of becoming isolated was averted because the President knew his cabinet members well and kept in touch with them. They had the personal relationship with Bush that would assure they could talk with him if they needed to. The President was constantly on the phone touching base with anyone who was involved with current policy issues.

But the President's penchant for keeping in touch, while avoiding the danger of isolation, did not entirely eliminate Sununu's attempts to control communication to the President. Sununu's personal policy agenda made it at times difficult for those in the cabinet or staff who wanted to speak with the President about a different approach to get through Sununu's gauntlet. This problem became public when both *Time* and *Newsweek* ran stories that senior Bush aides were so upset at being cut off by Sununu that the President was forced to open a post office box at his summer home in Kennebunkport, Maine as a backchannel so that his top advisers could contact him directly without Sununu's censorship.⁷⁰

The existence of this avenue of communication was publicly confirmed by HHS Secretary Louis Sullivan who admitted on television that he used the channel to communicate advice to the President.⁷¹ After the admission Sullivan quickly covered himself by saying that he had no trouble meeting with the President when he needed to on public policy issues but that he had used the post office box for "political

advice.” The point is not what Sullivan had to say to the President, the point is the very fact that President Bush felt compelled to set up a private post office box physically and organizationally outside the White House was an admission of organizational failure. John Sununu was not acting as a “neutral broker” of ideas for the President so that others would have confidence their ideas would get to the President intact if they submitted them to the White House staff. Instead, Sununu was seen as a biased filter screening out ideas he personally did not like.

Despite his rapport with the President and his ability to perform very valuable chief of staff functions, Sununu made four strategic errors as chief of staff:

1. He let his ego cloud his judgement and affect his behavior.
2. He succumbed to the “John Tower syndrome,” thinking that he did not have to be nice to people.
3. He fell victim to the “Gary Hart syndrome,” feeling that he was so important that he did not have to pay attention to the conventions of public morality.
4. He developed the “Don Regan syndrome”: stay in the limelight, and if things go wrong, blame the President.

Professional colleagues in and out of the White House criticized Sununu for his large ego. When he came to the Republican convention in Houston it was reported that Sununu had Vice Presidential aspirations.⁷² When he was chief of staff he had his staff do research to find out if the fact that he was born in Cuba disqualified him from being president.⁷³ One of his soft spots was his stratospheric IQ, which reportedly was 180. But it struck many with whom he worked that he seemed to have to put others down in order to demonstrate how smart he was. White House staffers and assistant secretaries did not appreciate being denigrated in front of their peers when their staff work did not seem to measure up to Sununu standards. He told one reporter who asked about his interpersonal skills that it “Depends how badly the other guy’s screwing up.”⁷⁴

An administration joke had it that the White House was run by “John Sununu and a thousand interns,” because he was unwilling to hire high quality subordinates as his own aides for fear that they would challenge his authority.⁷⁵ Another aspect of the ego problem was Sununu’s extreme sensitivity to criticisms in the press. When critical articles appeared he would have one of his aides highlight the negative comments, deduce their source in the White House, and then upbraid the presumed offender.⁷⁶ To one journalist he said, “Small minds ask small questions.”⁷⁷

Sununu really seemed to believe his oft stated maxim that he had a constituency of only one, the President. This led to Sununu’s strategic error number two: the John Tower syndrome. Senator Tower was President Bush’s first nomination to be Secretary of Defense. After many years in the Senate on the Armed Services Committee and several years as a Reagan appointed negotiator there was no doubt that Tower was qualified. But after he had been nominated people came forward with allegations about his private life, including excessive drinking, sexual misconduct, and possible conflicts of interest. Normally a Senator will be given an easy time by former colleagues in confirmation hearings, but Tower had been so rude and arrogant as a Senator that few of his former colleagues were willing to come to his defense

when the charges of misconduct were raised. Thus Tower was the first initial nomination by a President to a cabinet position to be defeated in history. A similar fate would befall John Sununu when he got into hot water.

Far from being responsible to a constituency of only one, strong chiefs have learned the hard way that serving the President means being able to cultivate other constituencies for his use. Sununu did not recognize this, and thus felt free to alienate Congress, the cabinet, the press, and interest groups as well as his White House subordinates. It is as if his attitude were: 'I am so powerful that I do not have to be nice, or even minimally civil, to other people.' In this he was ignoring the old Lebanese proverb that holds, "One kisses the hand that one cannot yet bite."⁷⁸ When Sununu got into trouble those who previously had to kiss his hand turned to bite it.

Sununu systematically alienated and insulted many members of Congress. He once called Republican Senator Trent Lott "insignificant," a serious insult in Washington, especially to a member of the Senate.⁷⁹ His behavior at the 1990 Budget Summit in formal meetings with the leadership of Congress was so obnoxious that he prompted Senator Robert Byrd to chastise him: "I have had thirty years in the U.S. Senate, and I have participated in many such summits, and I have never in my life observed such outrageous conduct as that displayed by the representatives of the president of the United States. Your conduct is arrogant. It is rude. It is intolerable."⁸⁰

Sununu was also willing to alienate cabinet secretaries as well as their subordinates. He often undercut their policy proposals to the president, which may very well have been part of his job as chief of staff policing the policy development function. When he fought HHS Secretary Louis Sullivan on civil rights policy or EPA Administrator William Reilly on environmental issues, it was arguably part of his job and carrying out the President's wishes. But the tone of his communications often left cabinet members feeling that more than policy differences were being conveyed. The gratuitous insulting of others is not a necessary part of the policy coordination function. Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady, a close friend of the President's, told a friend that he was sick of being denigrated by Sununu.⁸¹ Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher complained about being forced by Sununu to accept unwanted political appointees. Sununu also made a tactical error when he refused to let Defense Secretary Cheney use the presidential helicopter to fly to Camp David on official business.⁸²

Even though the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is an important Republican constituency, Sununu did not hesitate to brutalize its president, Dick Leshner, when he supported a cut in Social Security payroll taxes. He did so in a series of four letter expletives.⁸³ That Leshner was supporting a tax cut that the Bush Administration might very well have backed in different circumstances (i.e., it was not a matter of principle) highlights Sununu's extreme response to a relatively minor policy difference.

In defense of his behavior Sununu echoed other chiefs of staff in claiming he was merely doing the President's bidding. "I'm no freelancer. I meet with the president dozens of times during the day. . . . The president knows I'm following his agenda. . . . I know enough about the president to do exactly what he wants

done. Exactly what he wants done.”⁸⁴ In this statement Sununu was both claiming presidential authority for all of his own actions and subtly shifting the blame for any of them to the President.

Sununu’s explanation for his lack of civility is that each breach of good taste and manners was carefully calculated: “I guarantee you that contrary to the legend, any strong statements on my part are both controlled, deliberate and designed to achieve an effect. There is no random outburst. It all is designed for purpose. And I think the efficiency of the result is underscored by what we’ve been able to achieve.”⁸⁵ This rationalization is consistent with one important role of the chief of staff, playing the heavy for the President, being the enforcer of tough decisions and bringer of bad tidings to others. “I don’t care if people hate me, as long as they hate me for the right reasons,” said Sununu.⁸⁶ But that was the problem. Washington professionals understand that the policy preferences of the President are the responsibility of the chief of staff, and they expect him to be tough for the President. Professionals are willing to accept being beaten in the policy arena, but Sununu’s gratuitous *ad hominem* insults and rude behavior generated resentments much greater than mere policy defeats would have. Sununu acted as if he did not understand the import of his own words. People hated Sununu not because he was enforcing the President’s wishes but because Sununu was gratuitously insulting and personally obnoxious to them.

Sununu’s third strategic error was the Gary Hart syndrome. Senator Gary Hart was married and running for the Democratic nomination for President in 1984. When he was confronted by the press with allegations of adultery, he denied them and challenged the press to follow him around to prove his innocence. Not surprisingly, they did, and reported the next time he spent the night with model Donna Rice. This doomed Hart’s bid for the nomination. The point here is not about sexual behavior; it is rather about respect for conventional morality and appearances. Any person running for President must accept constraints on his or her personal behavior in deference to public opinion. If he is not willing to conform his behavior to general standards of public morality, he does not have enough self restraint to be President. The parallel with John Sununu is that he felt that he did not have to restrain himself in the use of the privileges and perks of his office.

In spring of 1991 *The Washington Post* reported that the chief of staff had taken more than 70 trips around the country aboard military aircraft. Almost all of the trips were designated (by the chief of staff) as official business, even though the purpose of some of them seemed to be to provide skiing trips for Sununu and his family. None of the 27 trips to his home state of New Hampshire were designated as personal. One of flights categorized as personal was to Boston for an appointment with his personal dentist. On such trips he was required to reimburse the government at commercial rates for comparable flights, far less than the cost to the government of operating planes for one person.⁸⁷ In addition, Sununu allowed ski-industry organizations to pay for his meals, lodging, lift tickets, and air fare for his wife.

When the disclosures caused a public scandal in May 1991, the President (whose early priority was to have an administration above ethical reproach) ordered Sununu to clear all future flights with the White House Counsel’s office. But in June Sununu

had a White House limousine take him to New York for a stamp auction he wanted to attend and solicited corporations to provide air travel back to Washington and other trips. The President again was forced to restrict Sununu's travel practices.⁸⁸

In an eerie parallel to another governor of New Hampshire, Sherman Adams, Sununu made several calls to EPA and the U.S. Forest Service to ask the status of applications to double the size of the Loon Mountain ski resort owned by a friend of Sununu, Philip T. Gravink. Gravink was a contributor to Sununu's previous political campaigns and had let him ski for free when Sununu was governor. While Sununu did not demand a favorable outcome for his friend's applications, his actions were described by an official as "a lot of bullying and bluster" that "made it clear what outcome the White House wanted in this case."⁸⁹ Ironically Sherman Adams, whose acceptance of favors from a New England businessman forced his resignation, was one of the founders of the Loon Mountain resort.

There is no argument here that Sununu's trips on government planes constituted outrageous or illegal behavior, or that White House staffers should always fly coach. Few would begrudge a few trips on official planes with occasional combinations of business with pleasure. High level officials in Congress and the executive branch have done this for decades, and it is standard practice in corporate America. The point is that Sununu abused his privileges and pushed them to excess. His bending of the rules was routine, pervasive, and systematic. He was unable to restrain himself from taking advantage of his position and amazingly was unwilling to rein himself in even after the President publicly admonished him. As with the Sherman Adams case, the small gratuities he accepted from corporations were not likely to affect his behavior. But the combination of those favors with White House inquiries to regulatory agencies presented the appearance of conflict of interest. By pushing his privileges too far Sununu became an embarrassment to the President who was forced to defend him in public. A chief of staff should never put the President in this position.

Sununu's final strategic error was the Don Regan syndrome: take credit when things go well, and when they turn sour shift blame to the President. At a November 1991 campaign fund raising speech in New York President Bush remarked that people in the financial community felt that interest rates charged on credit cards were higher than necessary and that it might spur the economy if they came down a bit. The next day Senator Alphonse D'Amato (R-NY) introduced legislation to impose a legal limit on the interest rates credit card companies could charge their customers. The economic wisdom of the proposal was challenged in the financial community and the Dow Jones industrial average fell 120 points. The administration had to back away quickly from the proposed legislation and publicly argue against it.

When asked by reporters about this embarrassing episode, Sununu said that the remark about interest rates was not in the President's prepared text but that the President had "ad-libbed" the remarks on credit card interest rates. This attempt to blame the embarrassing remarks on the President was rebutted by Marlin Fitzwater, the president's spokesman. He told reporters that the lines were in the printed text of the speech and were not ad-libbed. Some administration officials even said that Sununu, himself, was the author of the offending lines.⁹⁰

The issue in this case is not whether the lines were in the speech text or not. The issue is who publicly takes the blame for an embarrassing incident. In this case Sununu publicly tried to shift blame to the President. If Sununu were lying about the speech text, his behavior was outrageous. But even if he were telling the truth, it is not the role of the chief of staff to blame the President for an administration blunder. The appropriate behavior for the chief of staff is to take the heat in order to protect the President.

Sununu's actions in this case can be contrasted with a contemporaneous flap over civil rights. Counsel to the President C. Boyden Gray circulated a draft memo that instructed the end of using affirmative action racial preferences in federal government hiring. When the uproar from the civil rights community threatened to embarrass the President, Gray said that he acted without the knowledge of the President. It is highly unlikely that such an important and controversial policy change was not discussed with the President. But Gray took the blame in order to save the President from embarrassment, thus demonstrating an important role for White House staffers and acting as Sununu should have.⁹¹

Sununu's general attitude toward the press was reflected in his public reaction to a *Washington Post* reporter who covered the story of the credit card flap. After a bill signing ceremony on the White House lawn, he told Ann Devroy loudly and in front of others: "You're a liar. Your stories are all lies. Everything you write is a lie."⁹²

The final downfall and firing of Sununu took place soon after the credit card incident, which was merely the final straw. The striking thing about Sununu's term as chief of staff is how long he was allowed to stay. It speaks strongly of President Bush's gratitude for Sununu's support in the New Hampshire primary and of the President's personal loyalty to his subordinate, but it also demonstrates that he was performing highly valued functions for the President.

The firing came at a low point in the Bush administration; the economy was doing poorly, the President was sliding in public opinion polls from his huge popularity after the Gulf War, and the administration seemed to be in disarray. Sununu personally could only be blamed for the last of the three, but the scapegoat factor is a real one in Washington. Nevertheless, without Sununu's strategic miscalculations, he could probably have weathered the storm of problems for which he was not responsible.

When the ax finally fell, and the President asked for Sununu's resignation, he still would not admit to being at fault. He blamed the press, the White House staff, and pro-Israeli groups (supposedly because he was of Lebanese origin and had been active in Arab-American groups).⁹³ Even in his letter of resignation Sununu implied that all of his actions were at the behest of the President. "I assure you that in pit bull mode or pussy cat mode (*your choice, as always*) I am ready to help."⁹⁴

But in searching for enemies who would have liked to do in John Sununu if they had the chance, one is reminded of the Agatha Christie novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*, a murder mystery in which many suspects on the train had sufficient motive to have killed the victim. The mystery is solved when it is disclosed that *each*

of the suspects was guilty because each had plunged the same knife into the victim. Although the primary cause of John Sununu's demise as chief of staff was his own behavior, he had made so many enemies that there were abundant motives for many people to do the deed.

Conclusion

The experience with White House organization in the modern presidency has highlighted several important lessons. White House staff and organization will faithfully reflect the President, but should strive to counter presidential weaknesses. If the President is reclusive (as Nixon was), the staff should try to bring ideas and people to him (as Persons did for Eisenhower). If the President is too open, the staff should impose some order on access to the President (as Cheney did for Ford). If the President is too focused on details (as was Carter), the staff should encourage him to look at the big picture. If the President is too detached, the staff should raise issues, even unpleasant ones, to the president's attention (as the Baker system did for Reagan, but Regan did not).

Beyond this we have learned that, regardless of personal style or preference, the contemporary White House needs a chief of staff to impose order on policy development, guard access to the President, and settle administration disputes that are not of presidential importance. As the Ford and Carter presidencies demonstrated, someone short of the President must be in charge, or the President will be overwhelmed.

But if that necessary chief of staff takes a domineering approach to the job, it is a likely prescription for disaster. *Each* of the strong chiefs of staff (Adams for Ike, Haldeman for Nixon, Regan for Reagan, and Sununu for Bush) have:

- alienated members of Congress,
- alienated members of their own administration,
- had reputations for the lack of common civility,
- had hostile relations with the press.

And *each* of them has resigned under varying degrees of pressure, having done harm to his own president and the presidency.

A number of lessons about the role of chief of staff can be gleaned from the experience over the past four decades of the Presidency. These lessons which were too often ignored by the domineering chiefs of staff, include:

1. Carrying out the President's wishes will often make some people angry, but gratuitous harshness will not help the President or the chief of staff.
2. It is appropriate to guard access as tightly as the President wishes, but a heavy-handed assertion of personal power will unnecessarily anger members of the Cabinet.
3. The chief of staff has a constituency of more than one. It includes:
 - a. Congress: The President (or chief of staff) will sooner or later need support in Congress, so fences should be mended carefully after congressional feelings have been hurt.

- b. The Press: The President needs favorable press coverage. Having a cordial, professional working relationship with the press may not ensure favorable coverage, but it can help to mitigate bad coverage.
4. The President should not be put in the position of having to defend publicly a White House staffer.
5. A chief of staff cannot do the job in complete anonymity, but people will notice if the chief of staff squeezes into every photo-opportunity.
6. As Jack Watson says, the chief of staff is the President's "javelin catcher." The chief of staff should take the heat for the President, and in no circumstances publicly shift blame to the President.

This list may seem a bit preachy and obvious. But the lessons bear repeating because they have so often been ignored by the four domineering chiefs of staff in the modern presidency.

The ideal approach to the job is exemplified by James Baker, Jack Watson, and Richard Cheney. Each served his president well by performing as an honest broker and coordinator of administration policy. These people were in no way soft or ineffectual. They controlled access to their presidents with firm hands and enforced a discipline on the policy development process. They performed the other chief of staff functions such as giving credit for success to the President and taking blame for failures without letting their own egos get in the way. Each demonstrated that the chief of staff job can be done without absolute control by one person. There is, of course, no guarantee that a good chief of staff will lead to a successful presidency, but avoiding the mistakes of the four domineering chiefs of staff can improve chances.

In the end there is no salvation from staff. As Presidential scholar Bert Rockman puts it: "No system or organization ultimately can save a President from himself when he is inclined to self-destruct. And no system that a President is uncomfortable with will last."⁹⁵ A President cannot manage the White House alone, but he must make sure that someone is managing it to his specifications.⁹⁶ Presidents must be ruthless in their judgments of aides who are not serving the presidency. If presidents do not pay attention to these precepts their presidencies will be vulnerable to being run for others' purposes rather than their own.

Notes

1. For a full argument see James P. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1988), Ch. 2. For an argument that a chief of staff is neither necessary nor desirable, see Bruce Buchanan, "Constrained Diversity: The Organizational Demands of the Presidency," in Pfiffner, *The Managerial Presidency* (Brooks/Cole, 1991), pp. 78–104.
2. Remarks by Donald Rumsfeld at the American Political Science Association Meetings, Panel on "Presidential Staffing," (4 September 1992), Chicago. The author participated on the panel.
3. Presidency scholar Richard Neustadt argued in a memo to John Kennedy in 1960 that he should be his own chief of staff. By 1988, however, Neustadt had concluded that a chief of staff was necessary in the White House, though not a domineering chief. Richard Neustadt, "Memorandum on Staffing the President-elect," and "Does the White House Need a Strong Chief of Staff," both in Pfiffner, *The Managerial Presidency*.
4. For other analyses of the office of chief of staff see Samuel Kernell and Samuel Popkin, *Chief of Staff* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and Bradley Patterson, *Ring of Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

5. Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1963), p. 87.
6. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1963), p. 114.
7. Michael Medved, *The Shadow Presidents*, p. 243.
8. R.T. Johnson, *Managing the White House*, p. 82.
9. Patrick Anderson, *The Presidents' Men* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 161.
10. Michael Medved, *The Shadow Presidents* (New York: Times Books, 1979), p. 245.
11. Richard Tanner Johnson, *Managing the White House* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 93.
12. Anderson, *The Presidents' Men*, p. 184; emphasis added.
13. Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p. 148; Hess, *Organizing the Presidency*, p. 65.
14. See Michael Medved, *Shadow Presidents*, p. 253.
15. See Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency*.
16. Quoted in Hess, *Organizing the Presidency*, p. 65.
17. Medved, *The Shadow Presidents*, p. 248.
18. Medved, *The Shadow Presidents*, p. 248.
19. Anderson, *The Presidents' Men*, p. 196.
20. Medved, *The Shadow Presidents*, p. 254.
21. William Safire, "Abominable No-Man," *The New York Times* (3, 1986 [check date], p. A23.
22. Quoted in Stephen Hess, *Organizing the Presidency* (Washington: Brookings, 1988), pp. 105–106.
23. Quoted in William Safire, *Before the Fall* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 116.
24. Quoted in Frederick C. Mosher, et. al. *Watergate: Implications for Responsible Government* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 44.
25. Quoted in Hess, *Organizing the Presidency*, p. 118.
26. Quoted in Genovese, *The Nixon Presidency* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).
27. Stephen Hess, *Organizing the Presidency*, p. 119.
28. Author's interview, Los Angeles, CA (25 May 1983).
29. Author's interview, Los Angeles, CA (25 May 1983).
30. See Richard T. Johnson, *Managing the White House*, p. 218–221.
31. See the testimony of Alexander Butterfield before the House Impeachment Committee reprinted in Larry Berman, *The New American Presidency*, pp. 264–272.
32. See Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), Chapter 10 and p. 181.
33. Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game*, p. 305.
34. Donald Regan, *For the Record*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 272.
35. Ann Reilly Dowd, "What Managers Can Learn from Manager Reagan," *Fortune* (15 September 1986), p. 33.
36. Regan, *For the Record*, pp. 142–143, 144.
37. Stockman, *Triumph of Politics*, p. 76.
38. Stockman, *Triumph of Politics*, p. 109.
39. See Smith, *The Power Game*, pp. 314–315. The memo is reproduced in Bob Schieffer and Gary Paul Gates, *The Acting President* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), p. 83.
40. Memo dated 11/13/80, reproduced in Schieffer and Gates, *The Acting President*, p. 83.
41. Author's interview with Elliot L. Richardson, Washington (1 April 1988).
42. Smith, *The Power Game*, p. 299.
43. See the insightful discussion of Nancy Reagan's role in the Reagan administration in Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1990), pp. 312–316.
44. William R. Doener, "For Rhyme and Reason," *Time* (21 January 1985), p. 20.
45. Ed Magnuson, "Shake-Up at the White House," *Time* (21 January 1985), p. 10.
46. Bernard Weinraub, "How Don Regan Runs the White House," *The New York Times* (5 January 1986), p. 33.

47. Quoted in Cannon, *Role of a Lifetime*, p. 563.
48. Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics*, p. 18–19, Photograph, No. 42.
49. Quoted by Bob Schieffer and Gary Gates, *The Acting President* (New York: Dutton, 1989), p. 200.
50. Quoted by Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 721.
51. Bradley Patterson, *Ring of Power*, p. 306.
52. Maureen Dowd, "Saving Face Means Having It in the Picture," *The New York Times* (16 June 1991), p. 1, 18.
53. Smith, *The Power Game*, p. 81.
54. David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics*, p. 243. See also the caption under photograph No. 16., pp. 118–119.
55. Cannon, *Role of a Lifetime*, p. 566.
56. Regan, *For the Record*, p. 288.
57. Regan, *For the Record*, p. 3.
58. See Lou Cannon, *The Role of A Lifetime*, pp. 583–588.
59. Bernard Weinraub, "How Don Regan Runs the White House," *The New York Times* (5 January 1986), p. 38.
60. Quoted in *Business Week* (9 September 1985), p. 79.
61. Quoted by David Hoffman, "Regan: Chief of Risk" *Washington Post* (28 February 1987), pp. 1, 16. The rest of Regan's comments were: "Who was it that took this disinformation thing and managed to turn it? Who was it [sic] took on this loss in the Senate and pointed out a few facts and managed to pull that? I don't say we'll be able to do it four times in a row. But here we go again, and we're trying."
62. Quoted by Lou Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 720.
63. *Report of the President's Special Review Board* (Washington, 26 February 1987), pp. IV-10–IV-11.
64. See the account by Lou Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, pp. 722–732.
65. David Hoffman, "Regan: Chief of Risk," *Washington Post* (28 February 1987), pp. 1, 16. Reagan biographer Lou Cannon argued that Regan had four deficiencies as chief of staff: 1) His ego was too large. 2) He held politics in disdain. 3) He did not appreciate Nancy's role in the administration. 4) He brought the "mice" with him to the White House instead of recruiting a strong staff as Baker had. See Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, p. 567.
66. Dan Goodgame, "Big, Bad John Sununu," *Time* (21 May 1990), p. 24.
67. See David Broder, "What Bush Owes Sununu," *Washington Post* (1 May 1991), p. A19.
68. See Ann Devroy, "Sununu Swiftly Backpedals on Size of His White House Role," *Washington Post* (9 December 1988), p. A9; and "Transition Watch," *The New York Times* (8 December 1988), p. B20.
69. See Burt Solomon, "No-Nonsense Sununu," *National Journal* (16 September 1989), p. 2251.
70. See *Time* (30 September 1991), p. 19; and *Newsweek* (30 December 1991), p. 4.
71. "This Week with David Brinkley," ABC News, Transcript of program of 2 February 1992, p. 13.
72. See Eleanor Randolph, "The Washington Chain-Saw Massacre," *The Washington Post Magazine* (2 December 1990), p. 37.
73. Sidney Blumenthal, "So Long, Sununu," p. 168.
74. Quoted in "John Sununu: What Color Is Your Parachute?" *Spy* magazine (March 1992), p. 31.
75. See *The New York Times* (4 December 1991), p. B12.
76. *Ibid.*
77. Blumenthal, "So Long, Sununu," p. 168.
78. Quoted in *Time* (21 May 1990), p. 25.
79. Sidney Blumenthal, "So Long, Sununu," *Vanity Fair* (February 1992), p. 168.
80. Blumenthal, "So Long, Sununu," p. 168.
81. Blumenthal, "So Long, Sununu," p. 113.
82. Blumenthal, "So Long, Sununu," p. 168.

83. See Blumenthal, "So Long, Sununu," p. 113.
84. Juan Williams, "George Bush's Flying Circus," *Washington Post* (24 November 1991), p. C1, C4.
85. Quoted by Ann Devroy, "Citing Year of Triumph, Sununu Defends Actions," *Washington Post* (12 December 1990), p. A25.
86. Quoted in Maureen Dowd, "Sununu: A Case Study in Flouting the Rules," *The New York Times* (5 May 1991), p. 34.
87. Charles Babcock and Ann Devroy, "Sununu Deems Only 4 Plane Trips 'Personal,'" *Washington Post* (24 April 1991), p. 1, 6.
88. *The New York Times* (4 December 1991), p. B12.
89. Dan Goodgame, "Fly Free or Die," *Time* (13 May 1991), p. 18.
90. *The New York Times* (23 November 1991), p. 1, 10.
91. *The New York Times* (22 November 1991), pp. 1, 20.
92. Quoted in *The New York Times* (23 November 1991), p. 1, 10.
93. Ann Devroy, "Sununu Sees Vendetta As Source of Troubles," *Washington Post* (26 June 1991), p. A5; Sidney Blumenthal, "So Long, Sununu," *Vanity Fair* (February 1992), p. 112; Burt Solomon, "Sununu Will Leave Washington With 'Low Opinion' Unchanged," *National Journal*, (11 January 1992), pp. 90-91.
94. Letter of resignation reprinted in *The New York Times* (4 December 1991), p. B12 (emphasis added).
95. Bert Rockman, "The Style and Organization of the Reagan Presidency," in Charles O. Jones, ed. *The Reagan Legacy* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1988), p. 27.
96. See James P. Pfiffner, "Can the President Manage the Government?" in Pfiffner, ed. *The Managerial Presidency* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1991).