

# Decision Making in the Obama White House

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*Presidents attract extremely smart, ambitious people to serve in the White House, but the quality of the advice the president receives depends upon how he or she uses the available talent. Chief executives face daunting challenges in evaluating the onslaught of information, judging the perspectives of their subordinates, and ensuring that they receive advice based on presidential perspectives rather than the priorities of their subordinates.*

*Political scientists who study presidential decision making have come to consider several factors as central to understanding White House organization and process: the level of centralization, the extent of multiple advocacy, and the use of honest brokers to manage advice to the president. This article examines President Obama's decision-making style with respect to these three factors and uses several case studies to illustrate them: economic policy, detainee policy, and decision making on the war in Afghanistan.*

## Centralization, Multiple Advocacy, and Honest Brokers

Presidents have dealt with the challenges of obtaining useful information and advice in a variety of ways. To ensure that they receive advice from a broad perspective rather than from the necessarily limited perspective of their Cabinet secretaries who tend to be advocates for their own departments, presidents have expanded their White House staffs and used them as their primary advisors. In order to ensure that they do not make hasty decisions and neglect important considerations, some presidents have insisted on an orderly process of deliberation that includes opposing points of view and different policy options before making important decisions. Others have appointed “honest brokers” to their staffs to ensure that no important perspective from their staffers or Cabinet secretaries will go unheard. President Barack Obama continued to centralize policy advice in the White House and insisted on multiple advocacy in policy deliberations. He did not, however, appoint honest brokers but chose to control the details of policy making himself.

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## Centralization

Presidents since Eisenhower have steadily centralized control of policy and advice to the president in the White House staff. Presidents up through mid-twentieth century had relatively small White House staffs and saw the members of their Cabinets as principal advisors. Eisenhower epitomized what has been called Cabinet government, American style. That is, he used his Cabinet as a deliberative body and delegated leeway for his Cabinet secretaries to make policy within their own departmental jurisdictions. He summed up his vision of the role of his Cabinet secretaries in his instructions to them: "You are not supposed to represent your department, your home state, or anything else. You are my advisers. I want you to speak freely and, more than that, I would like to have you reflect and comment on what other members of the cabinet say" (Burke 2010, 361).

John Kennedy, after the disaster of the Bay of Pigs invasion, began to centralize policy advice in the White House when he instructed McGeorge Bundy to "set up a little state department" in the White House. President Richard M. Nixon, with his legendary mistrust of the career bureaucracies, institutionalized White House staff units, such as the National Security Council (NSC) and the Domestic Policy Council, as alternative policy development centers. He wanted his own analytic capability under his direct control so that he did not have to depend on the department or agencies of the broader executive branch for policy advice. As a consequence, Nixon increased significantly the size of the White House staff.

In reaction to Nixon's centralizing approach to governance, President Jimmy Carter attempted what he called Cabinet government by delegating discretion to his department secretaries. But after several years of frustration, he replaced five of his Cabinet secretaries and placed his confidence in the White House staff. President Ronald Reagan began with the intention of delegating to his Cabinet secretaries but soon realized that in order to control policy making, especially in foreign policy, he had to entrust it to his closest advisors.

Since Reagan, it has been generally accepted that presidents had to oppose the centrifugal tendencies of American government by depending primarily on their White House staffs at the expense of their Cabinet secretaries. The centralizing tendency of the presidency might seem on the surface to depend upon personal relationships and the preferences of presidents. Structural and systemic factors, however, drive the centralization of policy development into the White House. The perspectives of Cabinet secretaries are necessarily influenced by their policy perspectives and advocacy for their departments. To counteract these centrifugal tendencies, presidents need advice that cuts across department boundaries. In addition, White House staffers have the advantage of physical and psychological proximity to the president.

Given the steady trajectory of centralized policy making in the presidency, President Obama's continuation of the centralizing trend would be unremarkable. Yet Obama began his administration by promising his attorney general, Eric Holder, broad discretion in policy making on the prosecution of detainees in the war on terror. But after Holder had made some initial decisions, pressure from the White House staff, particularly Rahm Emanuel, convinced Obama to back off from some of Holder's decisions. As

a result of what was seen as Holder's lack of political sensitivity, Obama abandoned his experiment with delegation, as I will discuss below.

### Multiple Advocacy

Political scientists are students of structure and process and have argued that an orderly policy process can enhance presidential decision making; or at least the lack of an orderly process will probably hurt it. As President Dwight D. Eisenhower observed, "Organization cannot of course make a successful leader out of a dunce, any more than it should make a decision for its chief. But it is effective in minimizing the chances of failure and in insuring that the right hand does, indeed, know what the left hand is doing" (1965, 630).

Alexander George (1972, 1980) argued that presidents needed to assure that their advisory systems provide them with a range of alternatives for any important decision and that the best way to assure this was a system of "multiple advocacy." He argued that the mere presence of differing views among White House staffers did not guarantee the effective presentation of alternatives to the president. Thus, the system had to be consciously structured so that the representatives of different alternatives possessed similar intellectual and bureaucratic resources. Importantly, the implementation of multiple advocacy calls for active participation by the president in order to assure a balanced and structured debate over policy alternatives (George 1980, 193).

The comparison of two crucial decisions on Vietnam illustrates the importance of structuring advice to the president: Eisenhower's decision in 1954 not to commit U.S. ground troops and Lyndon Johnson's decision in 1965 to escalate the U.S. military commitment. Eisenhower structured his approach to elicit conflicting perspectives and considered them explicitly. Johnson's approach, in contrast, tended to narrow his options and discourage debate.

In 1954, President Eisenhower faced the decision of whether to intervene in Vietnam to rescue French forces that were surrounded at Dien Bin Phu or to allow the French to be defeated and pushed out of Vietnam. Eisenhower had developed a national security policy-making process that was relatively formal and based on the direct confrontation of policy alternatives. In his memoirs he described his approach: "I know of only one way in which you can be sure you've done your best to make a wise decision. This is to get all of the people who have partial and definable responsibility in this particular field, whatever it may be. Get them with their different viewpoints in front of you, and listen to them debate" (Burke and Greenstein 1991, 54). After a full airing of opposing perspectives in front of him, Eisenhower decided that it would be wise not to intervene directly in Vietnam.

In contrast with Eisenhower's approach to decision making, President Johnson made a series of incremental decisions in the spring of 1965 that led to an open-ended commitment of U.S. forces to the war in Vietnam. Johnson did not encourage his advisors to confront fully the broader implications of their decisions, and they failed to recognize explicitly the implications of each stage of the escalation. In Burke and Greenstein's terms, the sequence of decisions "was simply devoid of analysis" (1991, 278). Johnson's

series of decisions about Vietnam were in sharp contrast with Eisenhower's carefully orchestrated deliberations. Eisenhower forced confrontation of ideas among his advisors; Johnson suppressed disagreement. Johnson's insecurity and overbearing personality discouraged the open exchange of ideas; Eisenhower's experience and self-confidence led him to allow his judgments to be challenged in the course of deliberations. Johnson discouraged dissent; Eisenhower made it clear that he did not want yes-men. Eisenhower's NSC process was orderly and deliberate in allowing disagreements to be fully aired; Johnson's policy-making process, in Greenstein and Burke's analysis, was "an organizational shambles" (1989-1990, 575).

President Obama's major decisions exhibited careful (and sometimes lengthy) policy deliberations in which advocates for contrasting policy options directly confronted their disagreements, and often each other, in front of the president. In detainee policy, he brought Holder into the White House to directly confront those who opposed his decisions about trying accused terrorists in the civilian court system. In economic policy, he insisted that dissenting perspectives be presented to him directly in front of those favoring the consensus policy. During deliberations over Afghanistan, he insisted on being briefed on a counterterrorism alternative that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Michael Mullen did not want released (Woodward 2010, 237-38).

Obama's approach to multiple advocacy was epitomized by the deliberations over the war in Afghanistan in the fall of 2009, leading up to his decision to increase U.S. troop levels to more than 100,000. As Obama sought alternatives to sharp escalation, former Vice President Richard Cheney accused him of "dithering." But Obama insisted upon a continuing dialogue until he was satisfied with his final decision. I examine Obama's struggle to reconcile the disagreements over U.S. strategy below.

### Honest Brokers

Obama continued the trend of centralizing policy making in the White House, and he seemed to adopt the deliberative multiple advocacy favored by students of presidential decision making. But he did not seem to make use of honest brokers in his deliberations during his first two years in office. A number of scholars have developed the honest broker concept: Alexander George (1980) and John Burke (2009) in national security policy making, Roger Porter (1980) in economic policymaking, and James Pfiffner (1993) with regard to the president's chief of staff.

Alexander George, in his book, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, argued that the role of "custodian-manager" (honest broker) can be used as an important component of ensuring multiple advocacy in advising presidents. The honest broker acts for the president and ensures that deliberations involve advisors balanced in power and resources, brings in new advisors and different channels of information if necessary, and arranges for independent analyses of the premises of the debate (George 1980, 195-96).

In his book, *Honest Broker*, John Burke characterizes the honest broker roles as central to effective presidential decision making. He argues that "the NSC adviser is not just another policy adviser. Rather, the person in that position needs to be concerned with the fair and balanced presentation of information to the president and those advising the

president (often called the ‘principals’) as well as the overall quality of the organizations and processes that come into play in decision making” (Burke, 2009, 1).

Roger Porter, based on his experience directing the Economic Policy Board in the Ford administration, emphasized that all competing views must be weighed carefully and that the honest broker must “insure that interested parties are represented and that the debate is structured and balanced.” Porter described the role of honest broker:

The honest broker and his staff are not intermediaries between departmental advocates and the president, like a centralized management staff, but they do more than simply insure due process. They promote a genuine competition of ideas, identifying viewpoints not adequately represented or that require qualification, determining when the process is not producing a sufficiently broad range of options, and augmenting the resources of one side or the other so that a balanced presentation results. In short, they insure due process *and* quality control” (1980, 26).

In the Bill Clinton administration, Robert Rubin, director of the National Economic Council, saw himself, as had Porter, as an honest broker.

Pfiffner has examined the chief of staff as honest broker, and argues that Cabinet secretaries as well as other White House staffers must have confidence that their views will reach the president in unaltered form. If they do not have this confidence, they will use whatever backchannels they can activate to get their views to the president. Needless to say, lack of trust and use of backchannels will lead to a dysfunctional advisory system, and the president will not be well served. He suggests that Jack Watson (for Carter) James A. Baker (for Reagan), and Leon Panetta (for Clinton) effectively acted as honest brokers for their presidents. They controlled access to their presidents with firm hands and enforced discipline in the policy-development process. On the other hand, domineering chiefs of staff, such as H. R. Haldeman (for Nixon), Don Regan (for Reagan), John Sununu (for G. H. W. Bush), did not act as honest brokers, and each resigned in disgrace (Pfiffner 1993).

If the top staffer does not carefully play the neutral broker role but becomes a policy advocate, the burden shifts to the president to assure that all legitimate perspectives are well represented. This takes personal time and energy and embroils the president in the details of policy alternatives (Rudalevige 2009). The advantage for the president is that he gains an in-depth understanding of the policy issues; the disadvantage is that he has to spend personal time moderating staff disputes and ensuring that the process is exposing him to a full range of alternatives.

During his first two years in office, President Obama chose not to use the role of honest broker in his major decisions. Obama’s top economic aide, Larry Summers, explicitly rejected the honest broker role that Porter and Rubin had favored. As I show below, he tried to keep other economic policy advisors from getting their views to the president. Obama’s chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, was central to all of Obama’s important decisions. But he acted as a policy advocate, particularly favoring a more moderate policy stance than Democratic partisans in Congress or other Obama advisors favored.

In deliberations over Afghanistan, National Security Advisor James Jones might have been an honest broker, but Obama relied heavily on Jones’s deputy Thomas Donilon

for advice. Jones often felt that he did not have the access to the president that he should have had, and Obama did not consult him in the way he had expected (Woodward 2010). On the other hand, Jones did play a major role in communicating between White House civilian leaders and the Pentagon by translating the concerns of each to the other.

### Obama as Decision Maker: Three Cases

President Obama took a self-conscious approach to decision making and characterized his method as analytical and careful. He described his approach as pulling “together the best people and have them work as a team; insisting on analytical rigor in evaluating the nature of the problem; making sure that dissenting voices are heard and that a range of options are (sic) explored” (Walsh 2009). Obama explained his relatively cerebral approach to decision making as a rational approach. “You’ve got to make decisions based on information and not emotions” (Achenbach 2009). Obama may have been implicitly contrasting himself with President George W. Bush’s approach to decision making when he declared “I just think it’s instinctive. I’m not a textbook player. I’m a gut player” (Woodward 2002, 137).

#### Detainee Policy

In his campaign for the presidency, Obama criticized the Bush administration for its interrogation policies and promised to close the prison at Guantanamo if he were elected. After he won, he moved to keep his promises in order to create “a clean break from business as usual” (Stolberg 2009). Two days after his inauguration, on January 22, he mandated the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility “as soon as practicable, and no later than one year from the date of this order” (White House 2009a). The same day he issued an executive order directing the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to adhere to the policies specified in the Army field manual on interrogation, all of which comply with the Geneva Conventions; no “enhanced interrogation techniques” (EITs) could be used in interrogations (White House 2009b). Later in his first year, his administration decided to prosecute some Guantanamo detainees in the federal court system and to hold the trial of Khalid Sheik Mohammed in New York City. Republicans attacked Obama for each of these decisions, and political pressure forced him change his stance on civilian trials for terrorism suspects and the venue of trying them. Congress prevented him from closing Guantanamo Bay prison complex, but he held fast to his promise to outlaw coercive interrogations.

Obama made a number of policy decisions that changed the administration’s stance on these issues from a more “liberal” legal perspective to a more conservative and politically attuned stance. He rejected early policy advice from Attorney General Eric Holder and favored the more politically attuned White House advisors, particularly Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. The broader political sensitivity of Obama’s White House advisors overcame the more legally oriented judgments of the attorney general and the

Justice Department. Decisions on detainee policy became more centralized in the White House within the first six months of the Obama presidency.

Despite previous bipartisan support for closing the Guantanamo Bay prison, which had become a symbol of the mistreatment and torture of suspects in the war on terror, Congress prevented Obama from doing so within the one-year deadline that Obama had promised (McNamara 2006; Baldwin 2009). Political opposition for closing Guantanamo began to build in the spring of 2009, and in May Congress passed an amendment with bipartisan support to a supplemental spending bill that dropped the \$80 million the administration had requested to close Guantanamo. It also prohibited spending appropriated funds for closing Guantanamo or bringing any of its detainees into the United States.

During the Bush administration, it became abundantly clear that in the course of interrogating suspects of terrorism, U.S. personnel had used very harsh techniques (EITs) that sometimes amounted to torture and resulted in the deaths of detainees (Pffiffner 2010). Obama used the harsh treatment of detainees as a campaign issue, and he promised that such techniques would not be authorized if he were elected. His executive order of January 22 declared that Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions was a "minimum baseline" for the treatment of prisoners. It ordered that detained "persons shall in all circumstances be treated humanely and shall not be subjected to violence to life and person," including outrages on their personal dignity and humiliating and degrading treatment. "From this day forward" interrogations would have to be consistent with Army Field Manual 2-22.3 (2006).

Vice President Cheney and other Bush administration officials severely criticized Obama for his abjuring of EITs and accused him of endangering the security of the country (Thiessen 2010). President Obama also enraged supporters of the Bush administration's approach to interrogation by moving to release several memoranda on the use of EITs during the Bush era and photographs of U.S. personnel abusing detainees. While preparing to act in accord with a court order to release the memos (written by acting Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) Director Stephen Bradbury in May 2005) and photos, Obama was publicly entreated to reconsider by former CIA Director Michael Hayden, who organized other former directors of the CIA to object to the release. Emanuel and the political side of the White House warned the president that the release would cause a political backlash in the country, and Obama began to consider more seriously the political repercussions of the proposed actions.

On April 15, in reconsidering the advice of Attorney General Holder to release the memos, Obama in an evening White House meeting, set up a debate on the issue between his counsel Greg Craig, who favored the release, and NSC aide Denis McDonough, who opposed the release (Calabresi and Weisskopf 2009). Obama finally decided to release the memos. But after listening to an argument by Secretary Robert Gates and others that public release of the photos would likely inflame Muslims and lead to more violence that would jeopardize U.S. lives, he decided not to release the photos. At the same time that the memos were released, Emanuel announced that the administration would not prosecute CIA agents who used interrogation techniques approved by the OLC of the Justice Department (Klaidman 2009). Emanuel prevailed over Holder on the issues of releasing the photos and not prosecuting CIA interrogators.

After suffering criticism for his ratifying questionable pardons at the end of the Clinton administration, Holder wanted to demonstrate his independence from Obama, who was also his friend. He also wanted to distinguish his approach to the attorney general's office from the Bush administration's tight White House control of legal issues. Thus, he convinced Obama to publicly delegate to him the authority to make decisions about prosecuting terrorist suspects in the war on terror.

Holder's based his decision on November 13, 2009, to try the 9/11 suspects in criminal court on his conviction that civil trials would demonstrate American adherence to the rule of law, since the court system held the legitimacy of centuries of jurisprudence and was seen internationally as a model of due process of law. He was convinced that civil courts, having conducted hundreds of trials of terrorists, were capable of effectively prosecuting the 9/11 terrorists. Holder concluded that "Trying the case in an article III [of the Constitution] court is best for the case and best for our overall fight against al Qaeda" (Kornblut and Johnson 2010). One argument for using Article III trials concerned the willingness of European countries, some of which were holding suspected terrorists, to extradite them to the United States for prosecution (Savage and Shane 2010). They would hesitate to send suspects to the United States unless they were confident that due process would be guaranteed.

Obama ordered an in-depth review of the legal cases against Guantanamo detainees by a committee of the Justice Department, with representatives from the Departments of State and Defense, the CIA, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). With the committee's and Holder's advice, Obama decided that 25 Guantanamo detainees could be prosecuted either in Article III courts or military commissions, and detainees 110 could be released. He also announced that the United States would continue to hold some detainees without charges or trials. Such a policy amounted to indefinite detention without trial, for which liberals criticized him.

Holder and advocates for trying detainees in civil courts argued that Article III courts represented what was best in U.S. legal institutions and were a tried and true instrument of the U.S. justice system. They also noted that Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions requires that defendants be tried by "a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples" (Pfiffner 2010, chap. 3). They also argued that military commissions had only recently been set up by the Military Commissions Act and that trial procedures had not been tested in court or been subject to appeals. Thus, military commission procedures would much more likely be overturned by appellate courts than the procedures of Article 3 courts, which had survived appeals for decades. In pointing out the limited experience with military commissions, they noted that only three terrorists had been tried by military commissions, two of which were subsequently released.

Obama's earlier delegation decision allowed Holder to decide which detainees would be tried in which venue. But when Holder announced his decision to try some of the 9/11 suspects in federal court, Republican critics loudly objected. They argued that civilian trials would provide too many defendants' rights to suspects and that the defendants could use their trials to make public statements denouncing the United States. In contrast, the military commissions would allow hearsay and coerced testimony to be introduced as evidence.

The issue came to a head when, on December 25, 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to blow up an airplane using explosives that had been hidden in his underwear. He was unsuccessful, and the FBI took him into custody and questioned him about his terrorist connections. After weeks of public criticism of the administration's decision to prosecute him in court, Attorney General Holder wrote to Minority Leader Senator Mitch McConnell to explain the administration's policy. Holder pointed out that every terrorist suspect captured in the United States by the Bush administration, from 9/11 to 2009, was handled under the criminal law in Article III courts. The criminal justice system convicted more than 300 suspects and put them in jail (Center for Law and Security 2009).

When Holder decided to charge Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), the self-proclaimed master mind of 9/11, in federal court, he also decided that the venue would be New York City, since that was the "State and district wherein the crime [had] been committed" (Sixth Amendment). Because of the political volatility of the issue, the White House did not allow Holder to defend his venue decision publicly (Kantor and Savage 2010). The political backlash from the decisions to prosecute suspected 9/11 plotters and the Christmas hijacker in civil court created a political tempest, and the advocates for military commissions seemed to have public opinion on their side.

From the beginning of the administration, White House political aides, led by Chief of Staff Emanuel did not want contentious national security issues to endanger the administration's domestic policy agenda, and they tried to get Holder to react more sensitively to partisan political factors (Kantor and Savage 2010). For instance, Senator Lindsey Graham felt strongly that any 9/11 trials should be held by military commissions, and he offered to try to get Republican support for closing Guantanamo Bay if the administration would agree to try KSM and others by military commissions rather than Article III courts.

Rahm Emanuel thought that Graham's help in closing Guantanamo was crucial and wanted to reduce the partisan attacks about trials of terrorist suspects, so he continued to work with Senator Graham to cut a deal. According to Emanuel, "You can't close Guantanamo without Senator Graham, and KSM was a link in that deal." (Kantor and Savage 2010). Thus, Obama faced the dilemma of backing the initial decision of Holder about the best legal strategy for handling detainees or bowing to political pressure and switching from civil court trials to military commissions. Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman intensified political pressure when they introduced legislation that would have required all foreign terrorism suspects to be tried by military commissions rather than civil courts. Faced with this delegation-centralization dilemma, Obama chose to centralize.

These changes of policy by President Obama illustrate the forces for centralization of policy making in the White House. When Holder's decisions attracted political backlash, the White House staff, particularly the chief of staff, convinced Obama that the political repercussions of Holder's decisions were more important than Holder's legal judgments and his independence from the White House. The centralization of control of high-visibility legal policy in the Obama White House staff exemplifies pressures faced by all contemporary presidents to ensure that departmental perspectives do not undercut broader presidential interests.

## Economic Policy

Facing an economic disaster, President Obama announced his economic policy team in the third week of his transition. He chose Timothy Geithner, who had been head of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, as his treasury secretary and Peter Orszag as director of the Office of Management and Budget. In the White House, Christina Romer would chair the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), and Jared Bernstein, the vice president's economic advisor, would come to play an important role. Larry Summers, as head of the National Economic Council, was to coordinate and lead the economic team. Obama wanted to reassure markets by bringing in the iconic Paul Volcker, who had chaired the Fed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and had raised interest rates in order to wring inflation out of the economy. Volcker would act as senior advisor to Obama and head the President's Economic Recovery Advisory Board, though he did not have a position on the White House staff.

In order to assure that he was getting a full range of economic advice, Obama scheduled daily half-hour meetings on economic policy that were attended by Summers, Geithner, Orszag, Romer, Bernstein, and Emanuel (Alter 2010, 189; Lizza, 2009). Summers chaired the meetings and was the only economic advisor to have an office in the West Wing (Calmes 2009). As with other major policy issues, deliberation centered in the White House, with Emanuel overseeing the process for Obama. During the crisis Secretary Geithner was central to the key decisions, but Obama made the decisions, and Emanuel acted as a day-to-day overseer of Geithner (Alter 2010, 194). During the auto bailout deliberations, according to Steven Rattner, Emanuel "effectively started supervising Tim [Geithner] on a daily basis" (2010, 68). In contrast, President Bush gave much more leeway to his Treasury secretary, Henry Paulson, to shape policy, particularly concerning the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP).

Although Emanuel coordinated the process of decision making, Larry Summers did his best to control substantive economic advice to the president. In contrast to Robert Rubin, who ran the National Economic Council for President Clinton, Summers made no pretense at trying to be an honest broker. Rubin saw his job as assuring that the president was exposed to the advice of all those whose advice he should hear. Summers, however, rejected the honest broker approach. Several years before he came to work for Obama, he declared that "It is not enough, if we are to make the world better, to sign on to processes that explore all positions but cede the hope of changing anyone's mind" (Lizza 2009).

Summers was known for his sharp intellect and impatience with other White House staffers. He warned Obama during his interview for the position that he would be an advocate for what he thought were the best policies rather than an honest broker. "I'm not without self-regard and I don't suffer fools or foolishness easily. . . . [if you hire me] you are going to get a rigorous and serious argument" (Alter 2010, 190). Obama understood Summers's position, and its implications; lacking an honest broker in economic policy, Obama would have to spend more time himself ensuring that he received a broad range of judgment on economic matters.

In keeping with his statements to Obama, Summers's self-assurance led him to try to squeeze other economic advisors out of key meetings and access to the president. Early

in the administration, he tried to keep Romer out of key meetings, but she appealed to Emanuel who made sure she was included (Alter 2010, 198). He also tried to limit Geithner and Orszag's access to the president, though without (Calmes 2009).

Summers was successful in minimizing access to the president of liberal economists from the Democratic left, such as Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman, who favored nationalizing financial firms. Robert Reich, a liberal who had been in the Clinton administration and Warren Buffet, a highly respected billionaire businessman, acted as advisors to Obama during the campaign but had no access once Obama became president and Summers took over economic policy making (Alter 2010, 205). Later in the administration Volcker believed that the government needed to take a stronger regulatory hand in the financial industry in order to prevent a repetition of the meltdown of the economy as had just occurred. Summers favored a more conservative, hands-off approach and kept Volcker from seeing the president (Alter 2010, 194).

The lack of an honest broker in economic policy making forced Obama to become closely involved in the details of policy making. Obama himself had to monitor the deliberation to ensure he was receiving a full range of options. At one point in early discussions, Volcker wondered "Why would the president want to know that level of detail?" (King and Weisman, 2009). Obama deliberately sought out differing points of view. For instance, when he was considering a complex issue on the relationship of derivatives to the financial crisis and potential solutions, he felt that he had not been exposed to a full range of options, he ordered: "Get me some other people's opinions on this. I want more than what's in this room" (King and Weisman, 2009).

At a decisive meeting (March 26, 2009) on the fate of the auto industry, Summers excluded CEA member Austan Goolsbee because he disagreed with Summers and thought that the government should not bail out the auto industry. At the meeting when Summers began the briefing, Obama cut him off, saying "I read the memo" and asked about a dissenting paragraph deep in the briefing memo. CEA Chair Romer said that the dissent was by Goolsbee, so Obama ordered him brought into the room and asked him to lay out his best argument for not bailing out Chrysler. Goolsbee did not prevail, but Obama wanted to be sure to hear his side of the argument (Alter 2010, 178; Rattner 2010, 130).

Despite criticisms from the left that Obama did not seriously consider a broader range of options, CEA Chair Romer made the case that a stimulus bill (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) should have been larger than the \$787 billion. However, White House staffers intimately familiar with Congress argued that that would be treated as dead on arrival and that even the few Republican votes in favor would have been lost. Many Republicans in Congress criticized the president because they thought that the stimulus was too large and that it would increase the deficit too much.

In March 2009, there was strong pressure from the left to nationalize banks that were in serious trouble. Some on the right, however, felt that financial institutions, which had made poor business decisions, should be allowed to fail rather than being bailed out by the taxpayers. After considerable deliberation, Obama rejected the more extreme arguments from the left and the right. He followed the advice of mainstream economists in judging that the economy would fall into a recession rivaling the Great Depression

without government intervention. He finally decided to implement Geithner's plan to conduct "stress tests" on Banks to reassure the markets and encourage private capital would flow to them (Lizza 2009). He rejected both the left's call for nationalization and the right's arguments to leave the financial markets alone.

Similarly, in the auto industry crisis, Obama did not go along with conservatives who thought that the auto industry had made fundamental business errors and should have suffered the fate that the market system imposed: bankruptcy and dissolution. In White House deliberations, CEA member Austan Goolsby argued unsuccessfully that Chrysler should not be bailed out. Neither did Obama agree with critics on the left who argued that the auto industry should have been nationalized, which would have been a sharp break with U.S. policy historically. Instead Obama chose to force Chrysler and General Motors (GM) to reorganize under time pressure in order to obtain TARP funds (Alter 2010, 179).

Some on both the right and left thought that the large financial firms should be broken up so that there would be no firms that could hold the economy hostage because they were too big to fail (Alter 2010, 201). When the financial regulatory reform was being finalized, Volcker argued that the Glass Steagall Act should be repealed, and regulations on large financial banks should be tightened. Summers prevailed in limiting the scope of the new financial regulatory regime. As with the other policies I consider in this article, Obama ended up with moderate approaches to economic policy.

Thus, in economic policy making, since Obama had no honest broker to lead policy discussions, he acted as his own orchestrator of debate and interrogator of his aides. He read the briefing papers, mastered the details of policy, and acted as his own honest broker. In this way his style more closely resembled the policy analytic approach of Presidents Nixon, Carter, and Clinton than those of Reagan and George W. Bush, who tended to delegate the details of policy to their staffs. Obama's approach contrasted most starkly with that of President Bush, who let Vice President Cheney frame the issues, conduct detailed analysis, and dominate the policy process.

### **Escalating the Afghanistan War**

In 2002, just prior to the Iraq War, Obama, in criticizing the Bush administration's plans for the invasion of Iraq, said "I'm not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars" (Obama 2002). And in his campaign for the presidency, candidate Obama voiced his opposition to the war in Iraq and promised to begin to extricate the United States from the country, though not in an "irresponsible" or precipitous way. Obama compared the "dumb war" in Iraq to the "good war" in Afghanistan, which he argued that the Bush administration had neglected in its buildup for the war in Iraq. Between 2001 and 2009, the U.S. situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated; the Taliban was making a comeback and challenged both the central Karzai government and local tribal leaders for control of the country.

In his deliberations over the war in Afghanistan, Obama came to three key turning points: the decision not to de-escalate the war, the decision to change the fundamental strategy from defeating to degrading the Taliban, and the decision to send 30,000 more

U.S. troops early in 2010. Obama moved slowly in considering the major increase of U.S. commitment in Afghanistan and listened carefully to those who favored an escalation and those who argued for a smaller U.S. presence. Obama's approach to military decision making contrasted sharply with that of President Bush who proceeded using informal meetings and often excluded both political appointees and career officials from the deliberations.

Shortly after his inauguration, in March 2009 Obama decided to grant the military's request for more troops and sent an additional 21,000 troops to Afghanistan, bringing the number of troops to a total of 68,000 (aside from CIA personnel and military contractors). In May of 2009, he replaced the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General McKiernan, with General Stanley McChrystal, who favored a counterinsurgency strategy that would focus on protecting the civilian population and building Afghan capacity to govern rather than narrowly focusing on killing enemy personnel.

In the summer of 2009, it became clear that the United States was continuing to lose ground in Afghanistan, and military leaders began to ask for more troops. On August 30, General McChrystal sent a report to Secretary Gates proposing a change in strategy to fully embrace and implement a counterinsurgency strategy that focused less on force protection and more on interaction with the local population and building governance structures. Later that month, McChrystal delivered his confidential formal troop request to the president with options for 40,000, 30,000, or 10,000 troops (Kornblut, Wilson, and De Young 2009).

After receiving McChrystal's request, Obama began a series of ten formal meetings over the next two months to decide the future of the U.S. military commitment in Afghanistan. The McChrystal memo recommending the options for increasing troop commitment was leaked to the press in mid September, and General McChrystal stated publicly in London on October 1 that a de-escalation in Afghanistan would be "short-sighted" (Wilson 2010). He was asked if he thought a narrow missions in Afghanistan was advisable; his response was "The short answer is no" (Baker 2009). McChrystal's public stance made it clear that if Obama decided against an escalation, his political opponents would be able to accuse him of ignoring his military commanders on the ground in Afghanistan.

As Obama deliberated with his aides over the next two months, he was praised by some for his careful reevaluation of the U.S. military posture in South Asia. But he was also faulted for his extended examination of options; former Vice President Cheney criticized Obama's deliberations as "dithering." Some Democrats, most notably Vice President Biden, had become skeptical of the ability of U.S. military forces to defeat the indigenous forces of the Taliban and favored focusing on directly attacking al-Qaeda forces wherever they were in the world.

McChrystal's memo emphasized the importance of indigenous governmental forces to an acceptable outcome for the United States. "A foreign army alone cannot beat an insurgency. . . . This is their war." The U.S. would not be successful "until the Afghan people make the decision to support their government and are capable of providing for their own security" (McChrystal 2009, 2-5). He argued that the first "principal threat" to success was an "organized and determined insurgent" Taliban. But he identified the

second principal threat as the government of Afghanistan itself, which the United States was supporting. “The second threat . . . springs from the weakness of GIROA [government of Afghanistan] institutions, the unpunished abuse of power by corrupt officials and power-brokers, a widespread sense of political disenfranchisement, and a longstanding lack of economic opportunity.” He argued that these conditions “generate recruits for the insurgent groups” (McChrystal 2009, 2-5). The U.S.-backed Afghan government itself constituted a major threat to U.S. success.

In contrast to General McChrystal’s confidence that more troops would enable the United States to prevail in Afghanistan, Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry expressed skepticism. With the encouragement of White House staffers, he conveyed his judgments in several cables (which were also leaked to the press) to the State Department. As a general in the Army, Eikenberry had been in charge of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and was appointed by Obama in early 2009 to be the U.S. ambassador. Eikenberry’s skepticism about the Karzai government increased after the elections in August 2009 in which President Hamid Karzai won under suspicious circumstances and with accusations of electoral fraud. The judgment expressed in Eikenberry’s cable was that the Afghan government had not “demonstrated the will or ability to take over lead security responsibility much less governance. . . . Experience with troop increases, therefore, offers scant reason to expect that further increases will permanently advance our strategic purposes; instead they will dig us in more deeply” (Eikenberry 2009b). Further,

President Karzai is not an adequate strategic partner. The proposed counterinsurgency strategy assumes an Afghan political leadership that is both able to take responsibility and to exert sovereignty in the furtherance of our goal. . . . Yet Karzai continues to shun responsibility for any sovereign burden, whether defense, governance or development. He and much of his circle do not want the U.S. to leave and are only too happy to see us invest further (Eikenberry 2009a).

Both career military leaders had looked at the same political and military situation and reached opposite conclusions about the best direction for U.S. policy.

Despite Eikenberry’s advice to the president and probably as a result of the public stance of McChrystal, at the end of September Obama decided not to consider seriously a de-escalation of the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan. “I just want to say right now, I want to take off the table that we’re leaving Afghanistan.” (Baker 2009; Woodward 2010, 186). Nevertheless, Obama had not decided on how much or whether to increase the U.S. commitment.

Over the next eight weeks, the president’s advisors engaged in a wide-ranging and thorough process of deliberation. Military leaders, along with Secretary Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, firmly advocated increasing the U.S. troop presence significantly, by 40,000. President Obama, however, expressed skepticism about the need for that many troops and thought that a full counterinsurgency strategy would be impossible without many more troops than the 40,000 requested and that it would cost too much and take too long. He encouraged Vice President Biden to argue for Biden’s preferred option: a “counterterrorism” campaign that would focus on defeating al Qaeda rather than on building a government in Afghanistan that Afghans would support. He

instructed Biden, "I want you to say exactly what you think. And I want you to ask the toughest questions you can think of" (Woodward 2010, 160). Obama was, in effect, assigning Biden the role of "devil's advocate" in deliberations over U.S. escalation in Afghanistan (George 1980, 169-73). Several other White House staffers, including National Security Advisor Jones, his deputy Thomas Donilan, counterterrorism chief John Brennan, Emanuel, and Dennis McDonough, also expressed skepticism about a large increase in U.S. troop strength.

In a formal meeting on October 9, Obama made the key decision to change the U.S. mission to "degrade" rather than defeat the Taliban. According to Gates, "We need to eliminate Al Qaeda, but we only need to degrade the capability of the Taliban" (Sanger 2010, wk1; Woodward 2010, 219, 260).

Obama wanted to encourage frank disagreements about policy, but he also valued consensus once he made final decisions. "I welcome debate among my team, but I won't tolerate division" (Woodward 2010, 374). Obama and his White House aides became frustrated with what they considered recalcitrance on the part of military leaders to present him with several viable options for Afghanistan strategy. They insisted on their initial recommendation for the full 40,000 troop increase. At one point Obama expressed his frustration: "you guys just presented me four options, two of which are not realistic," and the third turned out to be very close to the 40,000 they favored. "That's not good enough. . . . You have essentially given me one option" (Woodward 2010, 278). Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mullen admitted that Obama was right and said "I didn't see any other path (Woodward 2010, 279). At one point Admiral Mullen tried to stop the vice chief, General James Cartwright, from presenting a report on an alternative, counterterrorism approach. When Obama heard about the disagreement, he insisted on having a full presentation of the report (Woodward 2010, 237-38).

By late October, Obama had decided to increase troop strength, although he had not yet decided the size of the increase. On November 11, Obama declared "What I'm looking for is a surge" that would get the troops to Afghanistan quickly, but with a drawdown beginning date of July 2011 (Kornblut, Wilson, and De Young 2009, A19; Baker 2009). The term echoed George W. Bush's final increase in troop strength in Iraq. A "surge" implied that there would be a relatively quick increase in troop strength but a clear time line fore beginning a drawdown. According to Jones, the intent was "to narrow the mission, and tighten the timelines" (Kornblut, Wilson, and De Young 2009, A19). The purpose of announcing a date to begin the drawdown constituted a signal to Karzai that the U.S. commitment was not open ended. According to an official at the November 23 meeting, Obama said, in effect, "We sent a message to Karzai of a short-leash, which is necessary now" (Kornblut, Wilson, and De Young. 2009, A19). Gates insisted that the drawdown timing be "conditions based," that is, dependent on the situation on the ground in Afghanistan.

At a meeting with his military leaders the day before Thanksgiving, Obama thought that he had set the troop level increase at 30,000, but Pentagon officials came back the day after Thanksgiving with further questions on the level of troops (Woodward 2010, 307-15). Finally Obama decided that he had to specify in writing what he had decided. "Maybe I am getting too far down in the weeds on this, but I feel like I have to" (Woodward 2010, 315).

His final terms included “a hard-and-fast 30,000-troop surge,” an official NSC review of progress in December 2010, and the beginning of a drawdown in July of 2011. After Obama’s decision, General David Petraeus remarked on Obama’s willingness to delve into the details of policy, “There’s not a president in history that’s dictated five single-spaced pages in his life. That’s what the staff gets paid to do” (Woodward 2010, 327).

Obama announced his final decision to his top civilian and military aides on November 29. The United States would send 30,000 more troops and try to get North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies to supply 5,000 more, and the NSC would conduct a full-scale review of the situation in December 2010 (Kornblut, Wilson, and De Young 2009, A19). Even though Obama had clearly stated in his campaign that the war in Afghanistan was one of his priorities, his decision risked alienating his support on the left of the Democratic Party. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi highlighted the political difficulty of Obama’s decision to increase the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan when she publicly stated that support for the escalation in the House would not be automatic. “The president’s going to have to make his case” to the Congress on his own (Kane 2009, A4). Leon Panetta encapsulated Obama’s political situation concisely: “No Democratic president can go against military advice, especially if he asked for it” (Woodward 2010, 247).

In the deliberations over Afghanistan policy, Obama acted as his own honest broker. In Alexander George’s words, the “magistrate” is the “one who listens to the arguments made, evaluates them, poses issues and asks questions, and finally judges which action to take either from among those articulated by advocates or as formulated independently by himself after hearing them” (George 1980, 201). In dictating his memo on the terms of the escalation, Obama explicitly rejected the options presented by his military advisors and formulated his own option.

Obama’s approach to decision making about war contrasted clearly with the approach of President George W. Bush, who said that he was a “gut” player rather than an analytical decision maker (Woodward 2002, 137). The decision-making process in the Bush White House was often marked by secrecy, a lack of deliberation, and the exclusion of members of the administration and the career services who ordinarily would have been consulted on important decisions (Piffner 2009). Obama’s approach was inclusive and more consistent with scholarly conclusions that “multiple advocacy” would best inform presidential decision making.

President Bush, in making the decision to try enemy combatants by military commissions rather than in normal trials (federal courts or Uniform Code of Military Justice [UCMJ] courts), did not consult or inform key members of his national security team, such as National Security Advisor Condeleezza Rice or Secretary of State Colin Powell. The order was drafted by David Addington, the vice president’s lawyer, and was purposefully kept secret from the rest of the administration. Vice President Cheney gave strict instructions that others in the White House and Cabinet be bypassed before President Bush signed it. Vice President Cheney and Addington also engineered the decision to suspend the Geneva Conventions without full consultation with NSC principals. Although William Taft of the State Department had written a dissenting memo and Powell did have a chance to see President Bush and force a NSC meeting, the decision had already been made.

President Bush's initial decision to invade Iraq seems to have been made over the course of a year or so and was characterized by incremental decision making along the way. Paul Pillar, national intelligence director for the Near East and South Asia from 2001 to 2005 noted "the absence of any identifiable process for making the decision to go to war—at least no process visible at the time. . . . There was no meeting, no policy-options paper, no showdown in the Situation Room when the wisdom of going to war was debated or the decision to do so made" (Pillar 2006, 55). CIA Director George Tenet agreed: "There was never a serious debate that I know of within the administration about the imminence of the Iraqi threat." or even a "significant discussion" about options for continuing to contain Iraq (Shane and Mazetti 2007).

President Bush's decision making on important war policies tended toward secrecy, top-down control, tightly held information, disregard for the judgments of career professionals, and the exclusion from deliberation of qualified executive branch experts who might have disagreed with those who initially framed the decisions (Piffner 2009; 2010). In contrast, President Obama conducted his decision making on the war in Afghanistan by deliberating and negotiating between military advocates of sharp escalation and civilian officials who favored a more modest approach. Although they did not get everything they wanted, Obama's military leaders won the debate. Thus, Obama and Bush took sharply contrasting approaches to military decision making.

## Conclusion

All White Houses staffs reflect the values their presidents, and Obama's White House staff reinforced his tendencies toward centralization, careful deliberation, and personal control of the details of policy. As have other recent presidents, he drew advice on all major decisions directly into the White House. The only surprise here was that he initially intended to delegate major legal decisions to Attorney General Holder. Political opposition, however, soon overcame this initial intention to delegate.

Careful, and sometimes lengthy, deliberation marked Obama's style of decision making. He insisted on multiple advocacy by requiring his staffers to argue their cases in front of him, as when he demanded that dissenting perspectives on economic and military policy be aired in person. He was criticized particularly for taking so much time to decide on whether and how much to escalate the war in Afghanistan. But the personal time he spent on a series of meetings with his NSC and military leaders demonstrated his determination not to rush into major additional commitments of U.S. troops.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of Obama's decision-making style was his personal involvement in the details of policy. Rejecting the use of an honest broker, either in principle or because of the personalities of the staffers he chose, Obama himself delved deeply into the major policies of his administration. In this, Obama resembled Presidents Carter and Clinton but contrasted sharply with Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush. When Obama thought that his military advisors were not giving him the range of options that he needed, he felt compelled to dictate a memorandum that specified exactly the details of his decisions on the escalation of the Afghanistan War.

Notably, all of Obama's major policy decisions moved his policies in a moderate direction, that is, away from the desires of the base of the Democratic Party and toward the center of the political spectrum. He reacted to political pressure on detainee policy by deciding to use military commissions for some trials and indefinite detention for some detainees. He rejected calls to nationalize banks and to let the auto industry giants GM and Chrysler fail. He resisted proposals to cut back on U.S. policies in Afghanistan but did not give the military as many troops as they had demanded.

Whether or not any of these policies would solve the longer-term problems they were intended to ameliorate, President Obama conducted the type of decision-making processes often advocated by political scientists. Obama's approach guaranteed that he fully examined all serious policy options. Whether or not he made wise decisions is a separate issue.

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