# The White House Interview Program

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White House transitions and operations are the focus of our transition preparation program because of the central position of staff in governing. A year prior to coming onto the presidential ticket with Governor Bush, Richard Cheney spoke of the critical importance of the White House staff to whatever it is a president does: "It's crucial in terms of how he's going to function as president, whether or not he's effective. His reach, his ability to sort of guide and direct the government, to interact with the cabinet, to deal effectively with the Congress, to manage his relationship with the press, all of those are key ingredients to his success."[1] It is the White House staff that on a daily basis manages those crucial relationships.

In addition to its crucial role in the effective start-up of an administration, our program focused on White House staff because of the paucity of operations information available to an incoming White House administration. When incoming Press Secretary Ari Fleischer entered his White House office on January 20, the built-in shelves were bare except for the four television sets used by all of his recent predecessors. There were no files left there from the Clinton Administration, nor should there have been. According to the provisions of the Presidential Records Act of 1978, records leave a White House with the administration going out of office.

Although Fleischer did not have records at his disposal during the transition or once he came into the White House, he had access to people who had previously served in the post and information on the operation of his office developed by the White House Interview Program (WHIP). He took advantage of both. The *White House Briefing Book* covering the Office of Press Secretary gave him information on the workings of his office and its routines dating back to the Nixon Administration. The typical briefing book contained three essays on presidential transitions as well as three interviews with former White House officials who worked on transitions, two White House essays, an essay on the operations of the office studied by the briefing book, and approximately a dozen interviews with officials who headed the office.[2] The book on the office of the press secretary, Fleischer commented, contains "a wealth of information and it is a wonderful road map to a job I had never done before."[3] With information covering the start-up and organization of six administrations, WHIP proved to be an important resource for those coming into all of the seven offices studied by the presidency scholars who wrote essays for the project.

## Information Provided to Incoming White House Staff: Interviews, Essays, and Organization Charts

Beginning in the summer of 2000, the White House Interview Program provided senior staff members of the Bush and Gore camps assigned to work on transition issues with the materials relevant to their task, including books by political scientists, governmental reports, our essays, our office organization charts, and selected interviews.[4] Once the election was decided, we delivered the remainder of our work to the new White House team, including our series of seven *White House Briefing Books*.

The information contained in the briefing books was based on a series of interviews conducted by project staff with former White House officials. The decision to focus on developing such a base of interviews was made by the board and members of the Presidency Research Group, a section of the American Political Science Association. The interviews were intended to complete the record of White House decisions and actions. In recent years, people working in the White House at a senior level have been reluctant to maintain records of meetings decisions and actions because of the flurry of litigation in the past two decades involving presidents and their staff members. According to Jodie Torkelson, head of the Office of Management and Administration in the Clinton White House, "I never saw a discussion memo after I got there. You had a meeting and you talked about it instead and no one took notes…. Ultimate numbers are written down but how we arrived at all of that is in people's heads because there were no discussion memos circulated, no notes taken of meetings. What you end up with is an end product but you can't tell how you got there all the time. That I think is the biggest loss."[5]

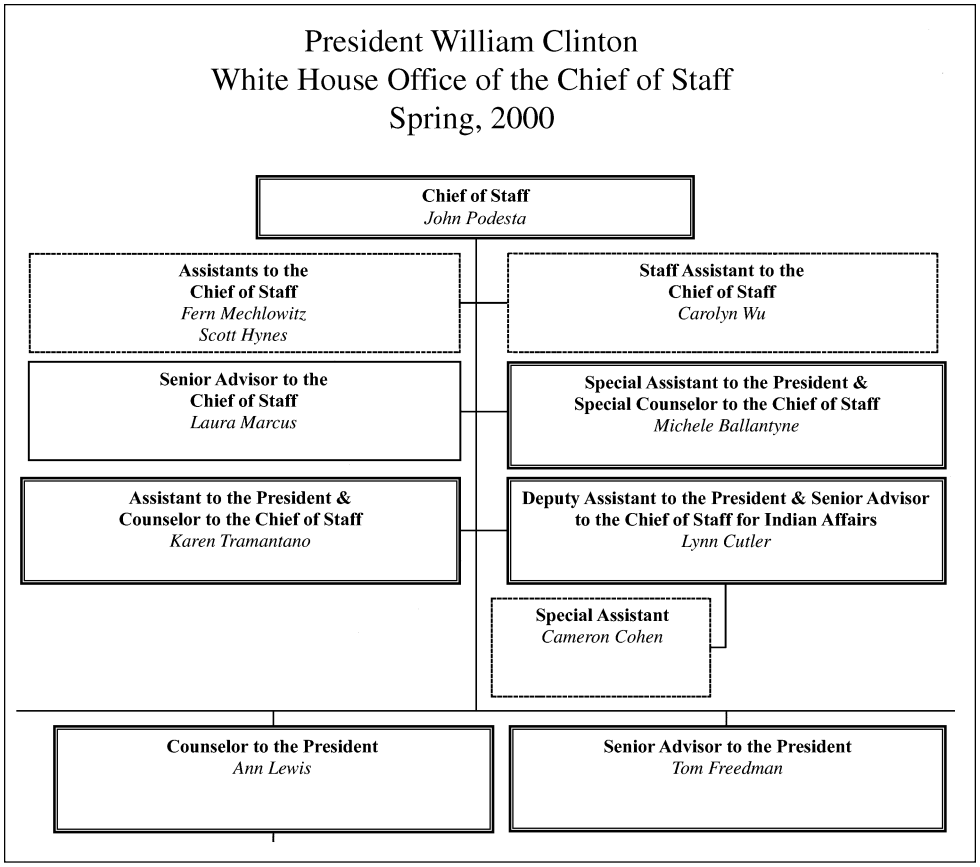
With great gaps in the record of an administration, scholars worried about the



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need to supplement the incomplete written record with oral interviews. Richard Neustadt (2000, 465) has pointed to the need "to repair the lack of institutional memory" through interviews with the principals involved in White House decision making. "The only way to partially make up those lacks is by interviewing, where the interviewer knows the record and can conjure up the atmosphere, while the interviewee still fully commands memory, inevitably imperfect, and both are eager for a genuine reconstruction" (Neustadt 2000, 465–66). Our goal was to talk to those people who were critical to the operation of the White House offices we studied and who could provide us with a portrait of how those operations worked.

I conducted a total of 78 interviews with 75 people who worked in the White House under Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton.[6] Using the interviews as their basic information source, presidential scholars then wrote essays about White House operations. The scholars associated with the project who researched and wrote about the White House staff are recognized for their work on the presidency. They are: Peri Arnold, MaryAnne Borrelli, John Burke, George Edwards, Karen Hult, Nancy Kassop, John Kessel, Martha Joynt Kumar, Bradley Patterson, James Pfiffner, Terry Sullivan, Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, Charles Walcott, Shirley Anne Warshaw, and Stephen Wayne. The selected offices the interviewees worked in are important to the successful start-up of a White House, and include the offices of chief of staff, staff secretary, personnel, counsel, press, communications, and management and administration.



A segment of an organizational chart from the Clinton administration, as shown in the White House Interview Program briefing materials. Based on data from *The Capital Source*, Spring 2000.

In addition to clearly documenting the importance of the White House staff to a president and to the success of his administration, our interviews cover information in the following areas: how these staffers came into office and what they knew about their job beforehand; their responsibilities once in office; the functions performed by their office; the relationship of their unit with other White House offices and with governmental institutions outside of the White House; and White House work life, including the nature of its pressures. Overall, we learned that there are more similarities than differences among administrations and we identified patterns within offices that helped incoming staff to have a sense of the operating environment of their unit.

Complementing our office essays are a series of organization charts mapping out the units composing the seven offices. Using *The Capital Source* (published by *National Journal*), which contains a detailed listing of the offices within the White House, we developed organizational charts for each of the offices for most of the years between 1978 and 2000. Those setting up an office were able to view some of the different ways in which their unit has been structured during the last four administrations. Karen Hughes, counselor to the president and assistant for communications, strategy and planning, and speechwriting, said that when she was structuring her office, she laid out the organization charts we provided and looked at the various ways in which communications was previously organized.[7]

During the transition period in 2000, and the early days of the administration in 2001, the directors and their deputies of the seven White House offices studied by WHIP read our series of *White House Briefing Books*. Clay Johnson, executive director of the Bush-Cheney Transition, asked us to organize our information in briefing books devoted to each of the offices. The books included three essays and three interviews on presidential transitions, two essays on the environment of the White House; essays on office operations, as well as organization charts of the seven offices, and a series of around 10 interviews with those who served as directors and deputies of the individual offices, and an address book providing the current addresses and communications links of those who previously served in the offices we studied.

## Audience for Project Information: White House Staff, Journalists, and Scholars

The *White House Briefing Books* found a receptive and appreciative audience among White House officials. Those who came into the offices stated they effectively



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used the information to prepare themselves to take over their new White House responsibilities. "Clay Johnson, who was the head of the transition, gave me the [briefing book on the office of press secretary] and he encouraged me strongly to read it," said Ari Fleischer two months into the new administration. "And he was right.… [the] book should be mandatory reading. It is very helpful."[8] Other office heads found the information we provided to be similarly useful in preparing to assume their new White House role. Karen Hughes said the materials in the briefing books on the Office of Communications and the Office of Press Secretary helped her "think through how to structure the communications [and] press offices. I found the organization charts and description of responsibilities most useful."[9] Dan Bartlett, director of the Office of Communications, indicated he gathered useful information in the following three areas: "organizational structure, lifestyle, communicating within the White House."[10] For Bartlett, "case studies [and] how to put together a presidential event" proved to be important practical applications of the material.

While the audience for WHIP was primarily those who came into the White House as staff, journalists have made substantial use of our transition essays, as have scholars. During the transition period, our material appeared in articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *National Journal*. I discussed project findings in appearances on television, including in spots on CNN, the News Hour on Public Broadcasting, Fox, MSNBC, and on radio news programs, such as National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*. Professors and their students have used materials from our web site, <www.whitehouse2001.org>, in their classrooms and will soon have available in book form the essays we prepared for the project in *The White House World: Transitions, Organization, and Office Operations,* edited by Martha Joynt Kumar and Terry Sullivan (2002). Now scholars may access many of our interviews with White House officials through the presidential libraries devoted to the administrations in which the officials served. Through an arrangement with the National Archives, our interviews will be made available for public use under terms and arrangements agreed upon by the interviewees, WHIP, and the National Archives.

**"What you end up with is an end product but you can't tell how you got there all the time. That I think is the biggest loss."**

**-- Jodie Torkelson, head of the Office of Management and Administration in the Clinton White House, on a lack of written records**

## Notes

1. Richard Cheney, interview by Martha Joynt Kumar, WHIP, 27 July 1999.

2. Presidential transition essays include: "Meeting the Freight Train Head On" by Martha Joynt Kumar, George Edwards, James Pfiffner, and Terry Sullivan; "Lessons From Past Presidential Transitions: Organization, Management, and Decision Making" and "Presidential Transitions: 1980 and 1988" by John Burke. White House essays include: "The White House World: Organization, Operations, and Work Life" by Martha Joynt Kumar; and "The Political Environment of the White House" by John Kessel. Office essays include: "The Office of Chief of Staff" by Charles Walcott, Stephen Wayne, and Shirley Anne Warshaw; "The Staff Secretary" by Karen Hult and Kathryn Dunn Tenpas; "The Office of Presidential Personnel" by Bradley Patterson and James Pfiffner; "The White House Counsel's Office" by MaryAnne Borrelli, Karen Hult, and Nancy Kassop; "The Office of Press Secretary" by Martha Joynt Kumar; "The Office of Communications" by Martha Joynt Kumar; "The Office of Management and Administration" by Peri Arnold, Bradley Patterson, and Charles Walcott.

3. Ari Fleischer, interview, "Working the West Wing," *Maryland State of Mind*, 7 June 2001.

4. We provided both the Bush and Gore campaigns with materials relevant to transitions and White House operations, including: James Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency*; Charles Jones, *Passage to the Presidency*; Bradley Patterson, *The White House Staff: Inside the West Wing and Beyond*; and John Burke, *Presidential Transitions: From Politics to Practice*. Government reports and information included all of the questionnaires and forms used in the appointment process, including the forms used by the Clinton White House, executive branch agencies, and all Senate committees that consider presidential appointments. We provided reports produced by the Congressional Research Service relating to presidential appointments, including those by Rogelio Garcia listing the latest titles used for positions requiring Senate confirmation as well as which nominations go to what committees.

5. Jodie Torkelson, interview by Martha Joynt Jumar, WHIP, 19 October 1999.

6. The building blocks of our project are our interviews with former White House officials, including President Gerald Ford. We completed 78 interviews with 75 people. Project Director Martha Joynt Kumar conducted the interviews. Nancy Kassop and Terry Sullivan joined in approximately eight of the interviews. The interviews span six administrations, represent all of our positions, and portray the different time periods within an administration. The largest number of people interviewed for one office are those who served as chief of staff and their deputies. Among the chiefs of staff interviewed are: Howard Baker, James Baker, Richard Cheney, Kenneth Duberstein, Alexander Haig, Thomas McLarty, Leon Panetta, Donald Rumsfeld, Samuel Skinner. The press secretaries we have on record are: Marlin Fitzwater, Mike McCurry, Ron Nessen, Jody Powell, and Larry Speakes. The communications directors interviewed include: Don Baer, Sidney Blumenthal, David Demarest, David Gergen, Thomas Griscom, James Holland, Ann Lewis, Gerald Rafshoon, Gerald Warren, and Margita White. The counsels we spoke with include: A. B. Culvahouse, Lloyd Cutler, C. Boyden Gray, Robert Lipshutz, Abner Mikva, Bernard Nussbaum, and Peter Wallison. The personnel directors covering several administrations are: Douglas Bennett, Constance Horner, Pendleton James, Jerry Jones, Fred Malek, Arnie Miller, Bob Nash, Bonnie Newman, and Chase Untermeyer. For the two lesser-known positions, the staff secretary and the Office of Management and Administration, our interviews include several principals. For staff secretary we have: Phillip Brady, James Cicconi, Rhett Dawson, Jon Huntsman, Jerry Jones, and Todd Stern. Those heading the Office of Management and Administration include the following: Richard Harden, Christopher Hicks, Timothy McBride, John Rogers, and Jodie Torkelson. In all of these offices, we have interviews with deputies as well as with those who headed the units.



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7. Karen Hughes, interview by Martha Joynt Kumar, 27 August 2001.
8. Ari Fleischer, interview, "Working the West Wing," *Maryland State of Mind*, 7 June 2001.
9. "Evaluation Questionnaire — White House Interview Program."
10. Ibid.

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