
The Fast Start

A former White House staff member lists seven ways the next president can make his administration a winner

by Stephen Hess

What is good for the president is good for the country is a proposition not always true, even though all presidents eventually come to believe it. However for the purposes of this exercise, which is to offer commonsensical advice to the next president, we assume his perspective.

There is no presidency for all seasons, of course. These are notes directed at a first-term president. They are also for a president who wants to be reelected.

Presidents have no shortage of advisers, self-appointed or otherwise, and we should try to be as helpful as possible in those areas that we think we know best. What follows, then, mostly relates to presidential organization or presidential press relations.

Avoiding contrariness

Incoming presidents vow that they will not make the same errors as the outgoing president. That mistakes have been made is always a given. That new presidents judge that they have a mandate to be different is also a given. This is most obvious if there is a changeover of political parties, especially

if an incumbent president has been defeated. But the urge to start afresh is even present when the new president is the old vice president. The principle of contrariness is very strong.

Newly installed President John Kennedy disbanded recently departed President Dwight Eisenhower's National Security Council machinery and consequently was left without a proper advisory body in the White House during the Bay of Pigs crisis. Jimmy Carter's antipathy to having a chief of staff was partly a reaction to the way Richard Nixon ran his White House. The adage to be recalled is "don't fight the last war." Or in the words of Richard Cheney, Gerald Ford's chief of staff: "Each new administration tries to organize itself in such a way that it avoids a problem that the previous administration had, but they always get it wrong."

In 1989 the danger of responding to an unengaged presidency is a return to Carterism. The president-elect must guard against abolishing things Reaganesque simply because of their provenance. One possible candidate for change is the relationship between president and cabinet. Although hardly noticed by public and press, Reagan created what his aide Martin Anderson calls a "fairly elegant solution to the problem of how to effectively use cabinet members in the development of national policy." It was called the cabinet council system and it consisted of six subgroups of cabinet members arrayed by

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topic, such as natural resources and the environment, commerce and trade, and so forth. Anderson reports that by the first week in December 1981 there had been 112 cabinet council meetings, roughly one-fifth of them chaired by the president. He goes on to say: "This meant that on 112 separate occasions a half-dozen or so cabinet members got into their cars and journeyed to the White House. They usually arrived 10 or 15 minutes early and stayed for a while after the meeting. Most of that extra time before and after the meeting was spent in discussion with other cabinet members and senior members of Reagan's White House staff.

"Sometimes after a meeting a member or two of the cabinet would join a White House aide in his office for further discussions. These short, impromptu discussions among and between the president's policy advisers were probably as important to the advancement and development of his policy as the meetings themselves. Valuable pieces of information were exchanged, disagreements got worked out privately, and Reagan's advisers got to know each other personally, intimately. It created, for a while, an unusual degree of harmony between two normally antagonistic groups, the White House staff and the cabinet."

Anderson's account of life within the Reagan White House may claim too much for what can be developed through cabinet councils. The system works best on issues that are least important to a president. On a scale of zero to ten, these are the number fives and below, issues like natural gas deregulation, telecommunications, federal credit policy—all mentioned by Anderson as having been studied. What should be obvious, of course, is that presidential policies less important than war or peace, boom or bust, are still very important.

The major test of the principle of contrariness in 1989 could be how the new president responds to "Irangate." If hard cases make bad law, as the lawyers say, so too do the sort of presidential actions that are given the "gate" suffix. When President Reagan chose to sell arms to Iran, he was disregarding the advice of his secretaries of state and defense. The fault was in the president's judgment, not his advisory system. The report of the congressional investigating committees rightly concludes, "Congress cannot legislate good judgment." When Oliver North arranged to divert funds from the arms sale to the contras—questions of legality aside—he violated rules of behavior that have governed NSC affairs for four decades.

An irony of the Iran-contra affair is that Reagan initially wanted to downgrade the NSC. It looked to Larry Speakes as if "the president and his top

aides . . . had such low regard for the position of NSC director that they paid little attention to those who held the post." If so, the president paid dearly for his indifference.

The Tower Commission offers some sensible advice on the role of the NSC advisers: they should have direct access to the president and not have to report through some other White House official; they should not try to compete with the secretary of state and the secretary of defense as the "articulator of public policy"; and they should focus on "advice and management, not implementation and execution."

Staffing the White House

A longstanding tenet of public administration holds that, in the words of a 1980 report, "The immediate staff of the president should be small. A large staff of personal assistants will reduce the president's ability to control those persons who speak directly in his name." This school of thought further argues in favor of "limiting the operational responsibilities" of the White House and avoiding the "temptation" of loading the president's staff with units representing special interests. In recent years, however, there has sprung up a school of counterwisdom that forcefully argues in favor of the presidency creating "a managerial capacity." Bradley Patterson made these 1988 estimates of the number of people who are considered White House staff members: the White House Office (including the Office of Policy Development), 568; the National Security Council staff, 190; the Office of the Vice President, 98; and the 45 percent of the Office of Administration that directly supports the White House, 91; for a total of 947.

But the issue is really one of functions, not numbers.

The White House unit whose function is most often questioned is the Office of Public Liaison. First constructed by Charles Colson in the Nixon administration, it has amassed at various times a body of presidential assistants to look after the concerns of business, labor, women, blacks, Hispanics, Jews, youth, the aged, Native Americans, consumers, ethnic groups, and farmers. As succinctly stated by Robert F. Bonitati, who served in the office in the Reagan White House, the problem is, "1) It raises the visibility of many issues that do not deserve such attention; 2) it brings issues into the White House that should be settled elsewhere in the government; 3) it enhances the importance of the 'interest groups' being represented; and 4) it raises some troublesome questions about 'interest groups' advocates par-

ticipating in policy-making decisions impacting their constituencies.” While it is true that these White House aides represent the president to groups that he needs in order to govern and get reelected, it is often more correct to say that these are presidential employees who represent certain interests within the White House. President Carter’s experience with his “counselor on aging,” Nelson Cruikshank, makes this point. As recounted by Joseph Califano, who was then secretary of HEW:

“Then, on January 24th [1979], Carter called. ‘Cruikshank is threatening to resign as my counselor on aging unless he can speak out publicly against the Social Security reduction proposals.’

“ ‘I don’t see how you can run your government and let a presidential aide attack the president’s proposals,’ I responded.

“ ‘Hamilton [Jordan] is concerned that if Cruikshank quits, he will organize all the senior citizens groups against us,’ Carter said.

“ ‘Can’t he just stay on and keep quiet? Just not support the proposals actively?’ I suggested, seeking to salvage the situation.

“ ‘I tried that. But Cruikshank wants to oppose them publicly,’ Carter said.”

Cruikshank stayed on and “delivered a stinging attack on the Social Security proposals before the [House] Committee on Aging.” Special group advocacy within the White House increased under Reagan. It is time to reverse this trend and abolish the office.

There is also the question of how the White House wishes to deal with the proliferation of local television news reportage from Washington. In 1979 there were slightly more than 300 reporters who covered Washington for local television stations and about the same number from the networks; a decade later, the “locals” have tripled in number and the “nationals” have remained the same. A new technology has created a growth industry in newsgathering. To date, local TV stations are most interested in news of their congressional delegations and most of their bureaus are located close to Congress on Capitol Hill. But this need not always be the case. The temptation of presidents to reach voters through their local news shows—whose audiences are greater than the network news—must be considerable. “With the rise of the locals,” says David Gergen, Reagan’s former director of communications, “the White House more than ever before is able, in effect, to narrowcast its message to a very specific audience. And local news gets a tremendous audience.” The problem is that local news is not simply a matter of letting in more cameras to cover what the president is going to do anyway, it usually means the production of an en-

tirely different kind of event and one that usually involves the presence of the president or the First Lady. Expanding this activity would soak up presidential time and should be resisted.

Meeting the press

The best way for a first-year president to control the flow of information is to hold frequent, full-dress televised press conferences. Ironically, this is exactly what the press says it wants.

There are three fallacies commonly included in most discussions of the role of presidential press conferences: that they are historically important; that they are journalistically important; and that they are breathtaking contests between reporters and president.

Press conferences also have one of the worst track records in terms of making news. If a president has something important to say, he can and does find far better vehicles than press conferences. Compare, for example, the news that comes from State of the Union messages. The press conference, however, could be said to make important news, if a president seriously misspeaks (which has happened only once, under Harry Truman, when he implied that the atomic bomb might be used against China during the Korean war), or if reporters, by their clever questioning, get presidents to reveal information that they would have wanted to keep to themselves. But any politician who has reached the presidency knows how to duck, bob, and weave sufficiently to stay out of trouble. As George Reedy correctly points out, “The president has the advantage since he can make a quip, evade the question, decline to answer on grounds of national security or simply turn to another reporter. It’s his news conference, not the media’s.” A president also can control the conference with an opening statement, by scripting answers to the expected questions, and even by planting questions with friendly reporters.

Nevertheless, sensible people are convinced that press conferences are high-stakes gambles for a president. Questions often *sound* tough. Questioners often *sound* confrontational. Yet when one reads the transcript of a press conference, what is asked and how easily it is parried produce a different reality. Another reason press conferences are viewed as gladiatorial contests is that reporters are constantly telling us that that is what they are. (This is good for business and for their egos.)

It is also very much in the president’s interest to perpetuate the notion that answering reporters’ questions is a dangerous business. Assuming that the president in 1989 holds frequent press conferences,

The best way to get rid of those appointees who are highly visible, possibly have their own constituencies, good press contacts, the potential to make trouble, and do not want to leave? Offer them another job.

he will be applauded by the press for restoring "a critically important means of communication" and applauded by the public for having the guts to go into the bullring.

Since the presidency is always a compared-to-whom proposition, "frequent" press conferences probably means having one every other week. Reagan averaged six a year; this schedule would quadruple the meetings while only returning them to the Kennedy-Johnson level. Restoring the press conferences to the 1960s frequency also may give a president some secret satisfaction in that it would cost the three television networks approximately \$114 million annually in lost prime-time revenues.

Whether or not press conferences are as useful to the American people as journalists claim, they can be highly useful to a president in a way that rarely interests the press. The preparation, involving the study of elaborate briefing books, becomes an excellent back-channel for a chief executive to find out about the lower reaches of his own government.

Post-Reagan press operations, in keeping with the principle of contrariness, can be expected to change in other ways following Press Secretary Larry Speakes's revelations that he invented presidential quotations. The press complains that it has problems getting accurate information. The White House complains that the press has problems covering the substance of policy. Both are right.

As the White House staff gets larger, it gets more differentiated, more specialized; presidential assistants, beyond the core ring of aides who service the president, are increasingly economists, scientists, and other professional specialists. Yet the White House press corps has not become more specialized as it too has grown in size. It is a general assignments beat writ large. Even Sam Donaldson, the "dean" of White House TV reporters, goes back

only to 1977, which should qualify him as an expert on two presidents but not necessarily on the presidency. Many reporters, such as Donaldson, get their White House assignment as a reward for covering the winning candidate during the campaign. News organizations use the change of presidents as an excuse to rotate reporters, thereby injecting mobility into their personnel systems. The rationale is that campaign reporters make valuable contacts with persons who will become White House assistants—a dubious proposition in that who you work for is more important than who you know in Washington journalism. A short tenure also assures that White House reporters are without a historical memory. (The wire services, who tend to treat the White House as a permanent assignment, are exceptions.) Having the White House covered by essentially political-cum-generalist reporters makes the peaks and valleys of a president's achievements more vivid. The peaks seem higher, the valleys lower.

A president could always push news away from the White House press corps. Instead of announcing major economic developments, for instance, he could have them come from the Treasury Department. Reporters on that beat are better equipped to deal with issues of financial complexity. Yet the thought for presidents of separating themselves from publicity is cruel and unusual punishment.

Since it is not within a president's power to reorganize the Washington newsgathering system or to reassign reporters (although some have tried), the next best hope is to seek to educate the White House press corps. For instance, the president's science adviser might make weekly presentations in the briefing room on scientific matters that affect federal policy. The difference between these briefings and the way press secretaries now try to fill up reporters'

time is the difference between a classroom and a showroom. This suggests also an additional criterion in the job descriptions of presidential advisers: the president's experts must be able to explain their expertise to the reporters whose job it is to explain the president's policies to their listeners and readers.

Living with leaks

Leaks, said President Ford, are a real "pain." They produce embarrassing news stories, throw off a president's timing, and consume an inordinate amount of high-level attention within the White House. If they get out of hand, they create very bad presidential management practices. With the threat of a leak hanging over his head like Damocles' sword, the president and his White House aides may severely limit the number of advisers who should be consulted or keep out technical experts who are not considered political loyalists. In short, the price paid for preventing leaks may far exceed damage caused by unauthorized publication.

The Reagan administration reached a new high in leaking, as will the next administration, because leaking has become such a routine and accepted part of Washington behavior and because, as government gets bigger and more complex, there will be more documents needed to produce decisions, more duplicating machines available to reproduce documents, and more reporters available to receive the documents.

So what advice might be useful to the new president?

First, he should understand who are apt to be leakers. Reagan's initial impulse was to blame the "large layers of the bureaucracy that you cannot change." But it is a rare bureaucrat who engages in leaking; the civil servants' world faces inward. They know how to thwart a president within their own agency. On the other hand, most journalists are outside their ken and represent risk beyond possible gain. Next a president tends to blame leaks on his press officers. But the press office tries to stay away from a practice that antagonizes the reporters who do not receive the leaks. The leakers, a president must be told, are his own political appointees.

Second, once the president understands who the leakers are, he can more readily accept the next proposition: a president is more leaked for than leaked against.

Third, as President Carter said, there is no "effective way to deal with the situation." Attempts to stop leakers, which usually involve wiretaps and lie detectors, are always painful, possibly illegal, rarely successful, and inevitably get a bad press.

The appropriate posture for a president, it seems to me, is to make a clear distinction between leaking and espionage. The latter is illegal and cannot be tolerated.

Picking the PIP

On every president's staff, deliberately or inadvertently, initially or eventually, there is a *primus inter pares*. The PIP will have different titles in different administrations—the assistant to the president, chief of staff, special counsel. And while the PIP is often thought of as a single person—a Sherman Adams under Eisenhower, for example—we are reminded by Richard Neustadt that there is almost always more than one "senior among seniors" in the White House. PIP is the acronym of a collective noun. Baker-Meese-Deaver of Ronald Reagan's first term is a PIP.

The skills of a campaign manager are not what the new president most needs when picking the PIP. This should not imply that all campaign managers lack PIP skills. Such skills are more likely to be found in the campaigns of "insider" candidates. Hamilton Jordan, the architect of Carter's 1976 victory, claimed to be uninterested in the ways of Washington. Although on-the-job training is possible, it is hardly the most efficient way to get off to a fast start, especially since there is no shortage of those possessing the necessary skills. Reagan, another outsider, chose James Baker, a former official in the Ford administration, as his chief of staff, which then gave him the luxury of adding two California associates without Washington experience to complete a three-person PIP.

The PIP should be deeply schooled in and sensitive to the arcane ways of Washington. The PIP is the president's fail-safe mechanism, the last redoubt between him and a misstep. PIPs who interpreted their responsibilities to the president largely in managerial terms—H.R. Haldeman and Donald Regan—served their presidents least well.

What background offers the greatest possibility for success? Former Senator Howard Baker, whose entire Washington career had been in Congress, is unique in that he was pressed into service to add his own prestige to a battered presidency. Other PIPs served in Congress for briefer periods (Sherman Adams and Donald Rumsfeld) or were congressional staff members (Theodore Sorensen, Walter Jenkins, Dick Cheney). Ignorance of Congress is fatal.

Chief executives must be sorely tempted to turn their most trusted political friends into their PIP. After all, they are surrounded by strangers, supplicants, and sycophants. Yet the PIPs of this descrip-

tion often have been the least effective. (Presidents need a friend, a role sometimes played by the First Spouse.) As Bruce Buchanan has put it, "Great chiefs of staff . . . may be no less difficult to locate than great presidents."

Getting a fast start

The overriding reason for a fast start is not directly related to a president's so-called honeymoon period. Rather, the attention of the public and mindset of the media are such that a president initially is noticed in a way that is unlikely to happen again, and thus what happens in the beginning is apt to cast his image in a mold that is extraordinarily difficult to recast. The impressions of the Carter and Reagan presidencies became firmly fixed in the first year, even though historians are going to prove they were not accurate portrayals of those presidents' time in office.

Whereas previous advice to a president-elect might have been "take your lumps early," this is now counterproductive and the new adage becomes "have a decisive victory, then take your lumps." Indeed a new president who comes to office without a complete program should promptly develop a limited agenda designed to produce at least one early decisive victory.

Getting a fast start is partly a product of how well the president-elect uses the ten weeks between election and inauguration. The problem is that candidates and their inner circles must dedicate themselves to the job at hand, winning the election. Planning for the transition is low priority and even may be counterproductive if it causes squabbling among the staff.

A recent trend has been towards larger and more elaborate post-election transition operations, which has been encouraged in 1988 by increased federal subsidies. Yet within the transition organizations there are always conflicts between "the politicians" and "the experts," those who are there because they helped the candidate get elected and those who are there because of special knowledge of how government works. Transition organizations are under added stress because many of the workers in them hope to find jobs in the new administration. Much time is spent bickering and gossiping, with the production of misinformation becoming so substantial as to eat into the energy of the small circle of those who really are advising the president-elect. As Edwin Meese, head of President-elect Reagan's transition, was fond of saying, "Those who know aren't talking and those who are talking don't know."

Presidents are notoriously bad at firing people.

This is almost a presidential trait. Why? It is that most of the people who become presidents have spent most of their lives seeking office (perhaps starting in grade school), an activity in which it is important not to make enemies. Like Willie Loman, politicians want to be well liked.

Disposing of deadwood

The question, then, is how to get rid of unwanted appointees and remain well liked. Indeed, this is so important that the success of an administration can rest on finding the answer.

In some cases there is no answer. There was no way that Richard Nixon could have gracefully removed Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox. In a few cases calling attention to the dismissal is part of the strategy, either because a dereliction of public trust is involved or as a warning to other appointees.

Most of the time, however, a president simply wants an unwanted appointee to go away without making a fuss. This happens more often than is usually noted. Every new administration has some persons who ultimately realize that coming to Washington was a mistake and quietly take leave of the place. But what is the best way to get rid of those appointees who are highly visible, possibly have their own constituencies, good press contacts, the potential to make trouble, and do not want to leave?

Offer them another job. From the president's vantage point, it is the former official, the insider who becomes the outsider, who could be dangerous.

Finding the right job for the unwanted official involves the fine art of equivalency. Take the case of Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara. Johnson respected McNamara, although he was discomforted by his defense secretary's closeness to the Kennedys. By 1967 McNamara also had become uneasy with the president's Vietnam policy. As the presidential election year approached, LBJ surely was calculating the damage of the Pentagon chief resigning and going public, especially if Robert Kennedy decided to challenge him for the nomination. So McNamara was offered and accepted the presidency of the World Bank. Not only had a potentially troubling political problem been finessed but the World Bank had been placed in exceptionally capable hands.

Had an equivalency been worked out for Donald Regan, such as making him ambassador and plenipotentiary to the Court of St. James—a title suitable to soothe a bruised ego—he would not have published while the administration was still in office his account of life and astrology within the Reagan White House. □

*A Defense lobbyist told the truth
about the Pentagon budget. Now he's out of a job.*

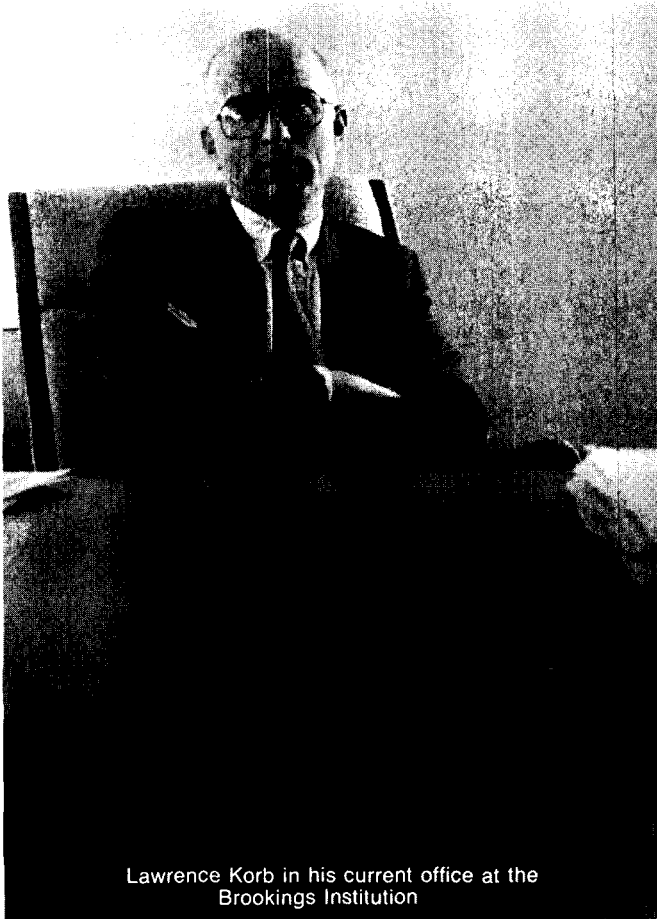
'Don't Shoot Me, I'm Only the Raytheon Lobbyist.'

by Lyle
Crowley

On a February afternoon in 1986, the day before President Reagan made a nationally televised speech to promote his defense budget, the Committee for National Security, a Washington policy group, held a press conference on Capitol Hill. On the dais was Lawrence J. Korb, who just the year before had been serving in the Reagan Defense Department as assistant secretary for manpower and military preparedness. Like many military men before him, Korb had left the public service to become a lobbyist. He was head of the Washington office of Raytheon.

In his remarks, Korb echoed what had become a rather familiar and accepted notion by the middle of the president's second term: with a vast deficit and an unwillingness to reduce spending on domestic programs, Congress was sure to cut the defense

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Lawrence Korb in his current office at the
Brookings Institution

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budget. Given this fiscal climate, Korb explained, he had signed on to the committee's alternative budget, a proposal to keep military spending at pace with inflation (rather than outstrip it, as the administration desired). He added that it was the best one could hope for from Congress.

"What we have to do is avoid the temptation for the easy cuts," said Korb.

The next morning, across the Potomac, the temperature rose inside the office of John Lehman, the

secretary of the Navy. Reading *The Washington Post*, Lehman was stunned by the headline: "Pentagon Ex-Defender Turns Critic." Lehman later told investigators that he "especially was upset" by the *Post*'s report that Korb had urged cuts in his 600-ship, 15-carrier-group Navy. (While Lehman had argued for 15 carrier battle groups, Korb supports 13.) At the press conference, Korb had not directly criticized the navy buildup, but he had