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The Chief of Staff as Lightning Rod: From Sherman Adams to John Sununu

Presidential staff "should be possessed of high competence, great physical vigor, and a passion for anonymity." So concluded the famous 1937 Brownlow report in what has become its most infamous passage. When this passage was read to President Roosevelt, he is reported to have "burst out chuckling and laughing and read the phrase out loud a second time." Presenting the report at a press conference, Roosevelt forewarned the assembled press "to sharpen your pencils and take this down. This is a purple patch, one you will never forget." More than one journalist must have thought what one said, "There ain't no such animal." The bemused reporters even ran a contest among themselves to select the best poem lampooning the proposal.

The cynic's view that "there ain't no such animal" has coexisted uneasily with the reformist's earnest plea for a presidency populated with more such creatures. In the half century since the Brownlow report, political observers have frequently lamented that presidential aides have forsaken Louis Brownlow's guidance. The chorus of protest became particularly vociferous in the wake of Watergate as presidential staff were roundly criticized for supplanting cabinet members as spokesmen and formulators of administration policies.

It is not only outside observers, however, who believe presidential staff should adhere to Brownlow's precept. Presidential staff, including chiefs of staff, also profess a belief in the value of staff anonymity. Nixon's controversial chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, admits to being "very strongly . . . [in favor of] the passion for anonymity viewpoint." "I tried," Haldeman explains, "to work behind the scenes where I felt I could be most effective." "As soon as you become the issue," Haldeman continues, "you've lost an enormous amount of your value to the president . . . as a staff person." Richard Cheney, chief of staff to Gerald Ford, subscribed to much the same
professional code, albeit with greater success. His function as chief of staff, he says, was to explain policy but “never to be quoted, never to be out front as a public official.” A similar vision of the staff role is evident in Sherman Adams’s comment that “I wasn’t there to accomplish things, I was there to help the President. Good staff people have to be measured by their dedication, by their hard work, by their sense of proportion. But not by their accomplishments. All the accomplishments belong to the President.” And Donald Regan, anything but anonymous, explained his role in the Reagan White House as “a sort of producer, making certain that the star had what he needed to do his best; the staff was like the crew, invisible behind the lights, watching the performance their behind-the-scenes efforts had made possible.”

Why do senior staff and especially chiefs of staff so often fail to achieve the anonymity that outside observers urge upon them and that they themselves profess to prefer? Why the discrepancy between professional creed and reality? Part of the answer can be found in the media’s (and the attentive public’s) fascination with the powers behind the throne. FDR’s skepticism about Brownlow’s “passion for anonymity” idea had more to do with his jaundiced view of the press than with worries about the self-aggrandizing instincts of presidential aides. As Roosevelt told Brownlow when the latter first presented the idea to the president, “Tell your British friend [who coined the phrase] that he doesn’t know his American press.” Foremost in Roosevelt’s mind was aide Tommy Corcoran, who despite (or because of) his “instinct for anonymity” had become the target of intense press scrutiny. Avoiding “Meet the Press” is no guarantee of anonymity. Indeed staying out of the public eye may only fuel anxiety about unaccountable power behind the scenes.

Another answer to this puzzle lies in a conflict within the professional creed of chiefs of staff. Chiefs of staff must reconcile a passion for anonymity with their responsibilities as gatekeeper, determining who and what gets access to the president; coordinator of policy making, determining what is and is not in accord with the president’s position; and spokesman for the president and his policies. Each of these roles conflicts with the precept of anonymity. By including some people and information and excluding others, staff inevitably create ill-feeling on the part of those who feel their message has been unfairly excluded. Coordination, in the absence of consensus, is another word for coercion, and coercion may induce fear but rarely loyalty or lasting support. Finally, seeing that the president and his policies are viewed in a positive light entails explaining the president’s policies in private and public forums. Protecting the president, in sum, is thus likely to earn the chief of staff a notoriety and enmity that override any passion for anonymity.
"THE SMALL END OF THE FUNNEL" 12

Presidents, like the rest of us, cannot possibly pay attention to everything at once. No president can afford to listen to, let alone grant, even a fraction of the requests made of him. Selectivity is essential. The staff's function is thus to filter out those communications that are not essential to a president's ability to make informed decisions. 13 Staff are positioned between the president and other governmental officials and given the job of screening which communications get through to the president. Such a function is indispensable. That selectivity is inevitable, however, is slight consolation to those whose messages have been excluded.

Those who have served as chief of staff are virtually unanimous in defining their role as an "honest broker" who presents all sides of an issue. At a recent conference that brought together a number of former chiefs of staff, Haldeman, Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Jack Watson all eagerly endorsed the honest-broker ideal.14 Each of Reagan's chiefs of staff have also publicly described their role in these terms, as has Bush's chief of staff John Sununu. 15 A chief of staff, explains Cheney, will not "survive very long if he, in effect, warps the flow of information to suit his own bias with respect to policy." 16 If others in the administration do not have confidence that their views are being communicated in an even-handed manner they will bypass the chief of staff and establish alternative channels to the president. 17

No doubt it is true that a chief of staff who insisted on expressing unsolicited personal policy preferences would not last long in the job. But the notion of chiefs of staff as nothing more than "honest brokers," like the media's claim to being an "electronic mirror" of society, severely underestimates the biases that necessarily intrude in making decisions about what is more important and what is less important. Discretion is unavoidable. When Haldeman says that the chief of staff "functions as an honest broker in the sense of eliminating or bringing together repetitious material . . . and organizing the material in an orderly manner so that the president can proceed through it," he disguises the substantial power involved in deciding what is repetitious and what is not, what should be organized in and what should be organized out. Of course "the president shouldn't have ten piles of irrelevant or unrelated paper that he's got to wade through, sort out, and figure out what to do with," but the power to decide what is and is not relevant or related is critically important in framing and reaching a decision. 18

Even a chief of staff committed to ensuring that the president hears all sides of an issue has the discretion to decide which advice needs to be "counter-balanced" and by whom. 19

If chiefs of staff see themselves as honest brokers, those who believe their message is not getting through to the president invariably portray that power in more sinister terms. As Michael Medved points out, "No one likes to be-
lieve that he has been denied an audience with the chief executive because his opinion is insignificant or irrelevant; it is much easier to blame a conspiratorial aide for cutting off advice 'the President needs.' Haldeman was "the keystone of a Berlin Wall around Mr. Nixon," the "Iron Chancellor" with "a gaze that could freeze Medusa"; Regan was portrayed as the "Iron Major" with "a look that would stop a locomotive in its tracks"; Adams was referred to as "the great stone face," the "abominable no-man" with "the disposition of a grizzly with a barked shin"; and Rumsfeld was dubbed the "Praetorian."

The role of chief of staff may be a twentieth-century response to the tremendous growth in the size of "the presidential branch," but the belief that top aides close to the president are preventing presidents from hearing valuable advice is as old as the republic. Typical was the lament of a former congressman, who complained to Lincoln's friend and campaign manager David Davis that an opinion was "quite prevalent" that John Hay and John Nicolay deliberately prevented letters from reaching the president. A sympathetic Davis forwarded the congressman's letter to "the impassable Mr. Nicolay," prompting an unapologetic response from Nicolay: "Literally considered this is true. . . . A moment's reflection will convince you that the President has not time to read all the letters he receives, and also that [among any] hundred miscellaneous letters there will be a large proportion which are obviously of no interest or importance. These the President would not read if he could." The need for aides to exclude "unimportant" or "irrelevant" communications has become increasingly critical in a political environment where more and more groups look to the president for answers to their problems.

Complaints about a chief of staff isolating the president frequently come from what political scientist Thomas Cronin calls the "outer cabinet," departments such as Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), transportation, agriculture, interior, commerce, and labor. In the Nixon White House, for instance, the earliest and most vocal critics of the "Berlin Wall" allegedly isolating the president were Interior Secretary Walter Hickel, Transportation Secretary John Volpe, HUD Secretary George Romney, and top health administrators within Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). Cabinet heads from these peripheral departments want to enlist presidential support for what they deem to be a worthy cause; the president, on the other hand, often prefers to maintain his distance from the outer cabinet, thereby preserving political capital for those central issues on which he holds the most intense preferences. Chiefs of staff protect the president by guarding against a run on the bank, thereby avoiding the dissipation of precious political capital.

If such complaints more commonly arise from the periphery of the administration, they are by no means limited to the periphery. In almost every
administration, officials from the “inner cabinet” (state, defense, justice, and treasury) can also be found lamenting their inability to gain adequate access to the president. During Reagan’s first term, for instance, Secretary of State Alexander Haig complained bitterly about the White House staff’s unwillingness to let him see the president alone, and National Security Assistant Richard Allen found that even his supposed ally, Ed Meese, was a “400-pound obstacle.” Eisenhower’s defense secretary, Charles Wilson, felt that Adams was blocking his access to the president, although the truth was that Eisenhower found Wilson tedious.

The role of gatekeeper places a chief of staff in the unenviable position of saying “no” to powerful people. Some, like Cheney or Jim Baker, have tried to deliver the negative in a relatively diplomatic manner. Others, like Adams, Haldeman, Regan, and Sununu, seem to have relished, and embellished, the image of the gruff, even autocratic no-man. Chiefs of staff have frequently blended personal characteristics with the strategic demands of the no-man role in such a way as to make it nearly impossible to tell where personality ends and role commences. Eisenhower aide William Bragg Ewald considered Sherman Adams’s abrupt gruffness “artfully ingenious rudeness.” But Richard Strout was perhaps closer to the truth when he wrote: “Perhaps [Adams] realizes that a reputation for gruffness is a buckler against bores. But it must be said that, for Adams, the switch between make-believe and real has the gliding ease of automatic transmission.” More recently, John Sununu has insisted “that contrary to the legend, any strong statements on my part are . . . controlled, deliberate and designed to achieve an effect. There is no random outburst. It all is designed for a purpose.” But even granting Sununu his strategic outbursts, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Sununu’s combative personality seems well suited to the gatekeeper role.

All chiefs of staff, no matter what their personalities, have been highly self-conscious of their role as presidential buffers. They have acted on the assumption that “every President needs a Darth Vader in the White House to thwart special pleaders and scrutinize even apple-pie issues.” Adams understood the division of labor perfectly: “Never make the mistake of giving me credit for everything. I just take the blame around here.” “If there’s a dirty deed to be done,” echoes Cheney, “it’s the chief of staff who’s got to do it. The president gets credit for what works, and you get the blame for what doesn’t work. That’s the nature of the beast.” Although some chiefs of staff have in fact reaped substantial credit for positive outcomes, as in the case of Jim Baker, more often they have left office with sullied or at least diminished reputations; the list includes Sherman Adams, H. R. Haldeman, Hamilton Jordan, Don Regan, and John Sununu.
"A HEADKNOCKER"

The president can personally settle only a fraction of interdepartmental disputes. Thus on many issues, a senior staffer is given the responsibility for settling interagency disputes. This staff person, as Richard Rose puts it, is designated "to knock together the heads of the disputants in order to arrive at an outcome." But not just any outcome will do. Senior staff are responsible not only for seeing that disputants reach an arrangement that both sides can live with but also for seeing that the negotiated outcome is consistent with presidential preferences. Coordination entails not just umpiring disputes but transmitting presidential preferences.

The headknocker function has figured prominently in the job descriptions of most chiefs of staff. Sherman Adams described his "routine" work as including "the settlement of occasional conflicts between Cabinet Secretaries and among agency heads." "I always tried," Adams explained, "to resolve specific differences on a variety of problems before the issue had to be submitted to the President. Sometimes several meetings were necessary before an agreement was reached. But with a few exceptions I was successful." Cheney recalls "repeatedly" being called upon to settle "a major conflict between two willful cabinet members." Jim Baker, tagged the "velvet hammer" by admiring aides, regularly called disputatious department heads into his office to "settle [disputes] on the spot."

Placed in the position of determining what is and is not consistent with the basic objectives of the administration, a chief of staff is always vulnerable to criticism from others within the administration who believe the president's real preferences are (or should be) different from those laid down by staff. In the Ford White House, for instance, Rumsfeld and Cheney were frequently the target of Nelson Rockefeller's wrath because the vice president felt that senior staffers were scuttling his policy proposals. Rockefeller's proposals were invariably found to be "totally inconsistent with the basic policy of the Ford administration," and it was left to the chief of staff to confront the vice president with this awkward fact. By serving as "that cushion, that rubber . . . between the president and vice-president," Cheney points out, the staff enabled the president to continue to have an excellent working relationship with Rockefeller.

Even presidents who have eschewed a chief of staff have had somebody fill the function of coordinating policy and ensuring that the outcome is consistent with presidential objectives. Joseph Califano, for instance, filled such a role under President Lyndon Johnson. Califano's office, remembers one Bureau of the Budget official, became a "command post for directing the Great Society campaigns, an operational center within the White House itself, the locus for marathon coffee-consuming sessions dedicated to knocking heads together and untangling jurisdictional and philosophical
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squabbles.”45 Knocking heads together antagonized many within the administra­tion who saw Califano as an aggressive “empire builder.”46

In the Nixon White House, John Ehrlichman performed much the same function that Califano had in the Johnson White House.47 When Attorney General John Mitchell and HEW Secretary Robert Finch squared off over school desegregation guidelines, when Arthur Burns complained that Pat Moynihan was issuing unauthorized policy statements to the press, or when Mitchell and Treasury Secretary David Kennedy clashed over jurisdiction of foreign drug busts, it was Ehrlichman who was called in to settle the dispute and to ensure that the settlement conformed to presidential objectives.48 Like Califano, Ehrlichman quickly made some powerful enemies within the White House. Within months of the new administration, reports surfaced in the New York Times that “complaints are coming in from senior officials who find themselves negotiating with Ehrlichman instead of Nixon.”49 Complaints about Ehrlichman’s intrusiveness became increasingly bitter over time.

Serving as a “headknocker” makes it difficult for a top staffer to remain anonymous because the role places the staff person at the vortex of intergovern­mental conflicts. Such conflict is likely to attract public attention, especially because losers in intra-White House power struggles often have an in­centive, in E. E. Schattschneider’s language, “to enlarge the scope of conflict,” to alter the balance of political forces by introducing new actors into the equation.50 An antagonist who chooses to go public in this manner can catapult even the most self-effacing and discreet aide into the public eye. As a consequence it is difficult for a senior staffer to follow Brownlow’s twin precepts of coordinating administration policy and remaining anonymous.51

THE ROLE OF SPOKESMAN

Those who cannot speak to the president seek out those who can speak for the president. Absent direct access to the president, reporters or congress­men or department heads ferret out those senior aides who confer with the president throughout the day, travel with the president, and know the president’s mind on a broad range of issues. Such people are few and not difficult to identify. President Eisenhower told the nation that his chief of staff “knows exactly what I believe, what are my convictions, my policy.”52 During the Nixon administration, attentive elites understood that Haldeman’s power rested on the fact that he “knew at all times exactly what the President was doing, what his current priorities were, what he was expecting others to accomplish.”53 “I meet with the president dozens of times during the day,” John Sununu told reporters. “[As a result] I know enough about the president to do exactly what he wants done.”54 Carter instructed his cabinet
members to "speak with Stu [Eizenstat] if you want to know my position," and Johnson told his cabinet, "When Joe [Califano] speaks, that's my voice you hear." The same intimate knowledge of the president's mind that enables a top aide faithfully to transmit presidential preferences to other actors within the political system also makes anonymity an unattainable ideal because an intimate knowledge of presidential intentions, preferences, and priorities unavoidably thrusts the aide into the role of presidential spokesman.

Some chiefs of staff have tried to preserve their anonymity by speaking to the press only on background. This was the practice followed by Cheney who, although he "talked to the press frequently," made it a rule to do so "always on background, always to explain policy, never to be out front as a public official." But if a low profile was Cheney's aim, he was only partially successful in achieving his objective. Especially as the fight for the Republican nomination heated up, Cheney's name surfaced increasingly frequently as the spokesman for the president on the subject of the Reagan candidacy. Who else could speak authoritatively for the president?

Even when a chief of staff avoids public statements, it is often difficult to avoid the limelight. In the spring of 1982, for instance, a New York Times reporter observed that "while Mr. Baker eschews public pronouncements, his name has replaced Mr. Stockman's in the headlines." Because Baker spoke for the president in budget negotiations with Congress, Baker was news whether he spoke directly to the press or not. A picture of Baker going into the meeting made the front page as did his private, behind-closed-doors comments that were leaked by other participants to the press. Because the president is news, those vested with the authority to act for and speak for the president also become news.

It is often said that the "big shift [toward a staff member serving as policy spokesman] has really been with the Reagan administration." In part this is accurate. Appearances by top presidential aides on television news shows seem to have greatly and irreversibly increased during the Reagan years. But the chief of staff's role as presidential spokesman does not emerge fully formed from the Reagan administration. In fact, here as elsewhere, the Eisenhower administration established a pattern that was developed during subsequent presidencies.

Sherman Adams, according to the conventional view, was the administration's "anonymous man" who "carried on his monstrous toil in a secrecy that was as zealously guarded as an atomic bomb stockpile." But Adams was much less shy of the limelight than people often remember or than Adams wanted people to remember. Adams was not only among the most publicly visible members of the Eisenhower administration, but he is also among the most visible chiefs of staff in modern presidential history. Adams may not have held press conferences, as some of his critics suggested he should, but on many occasions he spoke to groups of reporters or repre-
presented the administration point of view in public forums. A careful study of the record cannot support the claim made by Eisenhower's staff secretary Andrew Goodpaster that the Eisenhower administration "really had only two spokesmen in the White House. One was the press secretary, Jim Haggerty, and the other was none other than Dwight D. Eisenhower." Besides ignoring the important role Vice President Nixon played in presenting administration views, Goodpaster overlooks Adams's substantial role in publicizing the administration's views. Adams gave a large number of public speeches, most of which promoted administration policies, and some of which vigorously assailed Democratic leaders and policies.

Even when Adams did not make public pronouncements, letters and telegrams that he sent to congressmen, governors, mayors, and interest-group leaders explaining the administration position were often made public and reported in the press. What Adams told officials in private meetings also frequently made its way into print as, for instance, when Colorado Governor Dan Thornton publicly quoted Adams as having assured him that the president was not committed to continuation of the grant-in-aid system. However much Adams might have preferred anonymity, his role as presidential surrogate thrust him unavoidably into the public eye.

"MY LORD HIGH EXECUTIONER"

Few human beings enjoy having to personally fire other people. Certainly no president in recent memory has relished the task. One biographer after another tells how each president disliked such confrontations. Ronald Reagan, Lou Cannon finds, "detested confrontations, particularly over personnel." For all their differences, President Carter fully shared Reagan's aversion to face-to-face confrontations. Gerald Ford, too, as Hedley Donovan reports, "simply hated to lay down the law," preferring to leave unpleasant tasks to others. It is well known that President Nixon, as William Safire tells us, "never has enjoyed telling anybody bad news, firing anybody, or running down associates to their faces." Likewise, President Eisenhower "always had to be the nice guy. . . . [He] always had to have someone else who could do the firing, or the reprimanding, or give any orders which he knew people would find unpleasant to carry out."

Has chance ensconced in the presidency a peculiar bunch of conflict-avoiders? Perhaps. More likely, there is significantly more than personality at work here. President after president avoid such confrontations less out of psychic need than out of organizational necessity. Delegating unpopular tasks to those who are expendable helps a president maintain a positive image and thereby maintain political support. Presidents may indeed dislike personal confrontations, but so do most presidential aides. Mike Deaver,
who frequently wielded the ax for President Reagan, explains, "I would find it as hard as anyone to fire somebody who worked for me. But I could do it for someone else, if doing so served Ronald Reagan." Senior staff are not necessarily less sensitive people than presidents, but they are expendable in a way that presidents are not.

Deaver's case illustrates the extreme enmity that can accrue to the person assigned to be "the bearer of bad news" and explains why presidents have farmed out this job to top subordinates. In his memoirs, Deaver observes that because of "the President's distaste for an unpleasant scene" and because "both Baker and Meese were reluctant to . . . tell someone his or her services were no longer required, I was the guy who wielded the ax." As Deaver emphasizes, "That is a guaranteed way to develop a flock of ill-wishers." A White House aide agreed that Deaver "was the heavy all the time. He had to dump on the old friends. He was the bearer of the bad news," and the result was that people "thought he was power-crazy" and "one royal pain in the ass." The depth of resentment and bitterness against Deaver bubbled to the surface shortly after the 1984 election when a White House aide commented to a New York Times reporter: "Wait till he's on the outside. A lot of people he worked over will want to settle scores when he tries to call back."

If the senior staffer is perceived to be doing nothing more than carrying out the president's bidding, the bearer of bad news saves the president an awkward scene but little else. Dismissal of administration officials, however, is frequently accompanied by great uncertainty about what role the president has played. Even scholars looking at the facts years later may have a difficult time reconstructing exactly what role the president played in a personnel decision. Many are the officials who have been dismissed by a senior staffer and who have left Washington thinking the president was uninformed or at least misled about the facts. And more often than not, such perceptions have a solid basis in reality. For a chief of staff is not just the "executioner," not just the one who breaks the bad news. The chief of staff can also often be the prosecutor, the principal architect of a campaign to discredit a person who is felt not to be acting in accordance with the president's best interests.

SEEING THROUGH THE RUSE

During his years as chief of staff, Haldeman is said to have boasted: "Every President needs a son of a bitch, and I'm Nixon's. I'm his buffer and I'm his bastard. I get done what he wants done and I take the heat instead of him." Interviewed some years later, Haldeman gave a somewhat different, more reflective view of his role: "If I told someone to do something, he knew it
wasn't me—he knew exactly what it was; it was an order from the President. They knew an appeal wouldn't get anywhere. These two statements raise a puzzling question. If Haldeman's effectiveness as chief of staff rested on others believing that his wishes reflected the president's preferences then how could he serve as a lightning rod? If others clearly perceived that Haldeman was only carrying out Nixon's orders then why should they blame the chief of staff rather than the president?

One answer is supplied by Gerald Warren, former press aide under Nixon, who explains: "I hope . . . the American press understands that when Bob Hartmann leaks to Evans and Novak that Haig is keeping all those Nixon folks in the White House, he's doing that because he doesn't want to attack Jerry Ford. It's Jerry Ford who's doing it, not Al Haig." Warren's answer suggests that political elites are not fooled by the lightning rod ruse. They see through it, realizing that aides are only an extension of the president himself, but fabricate feelings of hostility toward the underling in order to avoid directly criticizing the president.

The further removed one is from the inner circle the more difficult it becomes to determine whether or to what extent a directive from a top aide reflects the president's views. Even the most attentive political elites have few opportunities to directly check for themselves whether an aide is carrying out explicit presidential instructions or is creatively interpreting positions near the outer limits of the zone of presidential indifference. Even the detached scholar who has access to the voluminous records of a presidential library will often have a difficult time determining where presidential will leaves off and subordinate discretion begins.

The difficulty that others have in determining whether an aide is speaking for the president will also depend on the president's leadership style. A president who barks out directives to subordinates and keeps a close eye on the implementation of those orders will create a presumption within the administration that the aide is carrying out the president's will. A president who shuns direct instructions and detaches himself from the day-to-day operations of the White House will generate much greater uncertainty about whether and when an aide speaks for the president.

The Reagan presidency provides a vivid illustration of the latter phenomenon. Martin Anderson, who served as a senior aide in both the Nixon and Reagan White Houses, was struck by the fact that Reagan "made no demands, and gave almost no instructions." Reagan's passive, detached style meant that many officials within the administration suspected (sometimes correctly) that top aides were not so much carrying out presidential directives as making presidential policy. Education Secretary Terrel Bell was convinced that Ed Meese ("the keeper of the radical right dogma") and his aides were carrying out their own agenda rather than the president's. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the U.S. representative to the United Nations, believed that Jim
Baker was doing far more than just carrying out the president's wishes in blocking her appointment to the National Security Council. Secretary of State Alexander Haig professed to be at a loss to ascertain which staff directives represented presidential wishes. "Did a demand for action by a Cabinet council come from the President himself?" asks a puzzled Haig. "It was impossible to know." When Meese and Baker appeared on talk shows to speak on foreign policy questions, Haig notes that "no one knew if what they were saying was the President's policy." Indeed, Haig confesses, "I myself was never altogether certain on this point."

President Nixon's directive style of leadership provides a stark contrast to Reagan's approach. Where Reagan rarely issued instructions except at the most general level, Nixon showed no hesitation in issuing detailed directives on even the most trivial of matters. Nixon would instruct Haldeman, for instance, to "tell Haig that when Henry [Kissinger] has his picture taken with Le Duc Tho, he's not to smile." Those familiar with Nixon's operating style had little reason to doubt (as those in the Reagan White House certainly would) that a directive from the chief of staff originated with the president. Kissinger, who understood that Nixon systematically used Haldeman to do his dirty work, was under no illusions that Nixon was behind the messages he received from Haldeman, even petty directives advising him to "present a sterner appearance" in pictures with Le Duc Tho. Haldeman seems justified in claiming that "every White House insider knew that I was [acting] at the President's direct order." He may even be correct when he adds, "so did most of the outsiders."

Certainly when Haldeman appeared on national television in early 1972 and charged Nixon's critics with "consciously aiding and abetting the enemy of the United States," Washington elites had little difficulty seeing through the ruse. Haldeman was too close and too loyal to Nixon, they believed, for him to have made such comments on his own initiative. Moreover, such a statement seemed perfectly consistent with what many believed to be the "real" Nixon. In reporting Haldeman's comments, the Times stressed that "the Administration's critics quickly assumed today that Mr. Haldeman was reflecting the President's view in saying that those who attacked the latest Nixon plan to end the Vietnam war were 'consciously aiding and abetting the enemy of the United States.'" As Senator Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) put it, Haldeman's attack only showed that "the old Nixon is emerging again." A Times editorial on "The Haldeman Smear" pointed out that "the President cannot so easily isolate himself . . . from the public comments of a man who has been a close personal associate for many years who currently serves as coordinator of White House affairs." For the Times, both Haldeman's position and his past made it implausible to assume he did not express the president's views. Haldeman, as James Reston pointed out, "is a loyal Nixon man" who was simply "being shoved into the act." Because Haldeman...
man lacked independent stature and was positioned at the president’s right hand, the White House efforts to disavow his comments as “his own personal point of view,” and not necessarily those of Nixon, only fueled a “credibility gap.”

Even after Nixon, in a televised speech two days later, adopted a more conciliatory position than the one taken by Haldeman, most elites still seemed unwilling to let Nixon evade responsibility for Haldeman’s statement. “The Nixon technique,” Mayor John Lindsey said, “is all too familiar. . . . [It is] McCarthyism pure and simple.”99 “Nixon’s softer tone,” reported the Times, “had not removed McGovern’s suspicion that Haldeman’s comments had been programmed by the President himself.”100 And many months later, columnist William V. Shannon recounted the incident to his readers by noting that “Nixon sent Haldeman . . . on a television interview show to say that Muskie and others were ‘consciously aiding and abetting the enemy.’”101

Haldeman’s spectacular failure as a lightning rod was due to several factors. First, because he was a top staff person with extremely close ties to Nixon, it strained credibility that Haldeman was acting on his own. When Nixon was asked about Haldeman’s statement at a press conference, the reporter prefaced his question by saying, “Do you think that Mr. Haldeman’s statement, since he is so close to you, and a lot of people interpret his thinking as very close to yours.”102 Second, Haldeman’s behavior seemed to conform to what many people perceived to be a Nixonian pattern. This sentiment was reflected in a letter to the editor, which pointed out that Haldeman’s statement “strikingly recalls the similarly irresponsible cries of the dark days of Richard M. Nixon, who is alive and well and now living in the White House. Let’s not forget Helen Gahagan Douglas and all the others.”103 Nixon’s reputation for deviousness and dissembling made it difficult to sustain Haldeman as a plausible lightning rod.

Using chiefs of staff as lightning rods, as this episode illustrates, is risky business. Because chiefs of staff are so close to the president, for them to engage an issue is to bring controversy only a step away from the president’s door. The advantage of using cabinet members as lightning rods is that they are further removed from the president. This is particularly true for departments in the outer cabinet. Their distance from the president, as Richard Rose explains, means they are particularly well suited to acting as “buffers that keep subgovernment problems from becoming White House problems.”104 For instance, when Carter’s transportation secretary, Brock Adams, suggested to a congressional committee that some of the revenue from a proposed gas-guzzler tax be used for mass transit, Press Secretary Jody Powell could plausibly reject the idea (even though Carter had personally cleared Adams’s testimony), insisting that “Secretary Adams was speaking for himself.”105 As an issue becomes engaged by those aides closest to the president,
however, it becomes much more difficult for the president to disown knowledge or involvement without seeming at best disengaged and at worst disingenuous or even dishonest.

AN INTERNAL LIGHTNING ROD

A chief of staff’s critics typically look significantly different from a cabinet member’s critics. The bitterest critics of a cabinet member are most often partisan critics on the outside. Criticism of Secretaries Benson, Watt, Dulles, Acheson, Kissinger, and Brownell emanated largely from members of the opposition party or from groups with weak ties to the administration. The severest critics of a powerful White House aide, in contrast, are frequently found within the president’s own party and especially within the president’s own administration. As Cheney points out, the chief of staff’s function “is to be the cushion that takes the pain and the heat, oftentimes not only externally but also internally.” Adams, Haldeman, Regan, and Sununu were hardly beloved by Democrats, but it was Republicans in each case who clamored the loudest for their scalps. The explanation for this pattern is not hard to find: it is members of the president’s own party and especially members of the president’s own administration who are most likely to feel they have a need or a right to see the president. In carrying out their gatekeeper function it is thus largely to members of their own party that chiefs of staff must say no.

This is not to say that strong chiefs of staff do not have vigorous critics on the other side of the aisle. Indeed, their role as promoter of administration policy means that they inevitably expose themselves to criticism from opponents of administration policy. Moreover, many chiefs of staff have been aggressive critics of the opposition, especially around election time. In 1954, for instance, Sherman Adams lashed out at the Democrats as “political sadists” who were trying to talk the country into a depression, substituting the “Fear Deal” for the “Fair Deal.” Unless a Republican Congress were elected, Adams declared, the nation would be “turned back once more to the spending sprees and political orgies to which the American people called a halt in 1952.” And in 1958, Adams climbed back onto the political stump to blame the Democrats for Pearl Harbor, “the tragic loss of China,” and “the scientific catastrophe of losing our atomic secrets.” The “befuddled” Democratic party, he railed, was “a political monstrosity” with “two heads, two hearts, and two souls,” united only by “lust for privileges of public office.” On national television, as we have already seen, Haldeman accused Democratic critics of the president’s peace plan of “consciously aiding and abetting the enemy of the United States.” So, too, did Sununu plant his share of partisan barbs into the opposition’s hide.
These public attacks on the opposition make it all the more remarkable that a chief of staff's bitterest enemies so often come from within the administration and from congressmen of the same party. Democratic dislike for Adams, for instance, could not compare with the hostility felt by leading Republicans. Republican National Chairman Leonard Hall told Adams, "Some of my people think you've got horns that are halfway between a Washington snowslide and a bundle of icicles. The fact is they think that in you where the milk of human kindness ought to be, there is only ice-water." Republican antipathy toward Adams went beyond that felt by Old Guard Taft Republicans, who believed Adams was moving administration policy in a liberal, New Deal direction. Republicans of every ideological stripe, historian Stephen Ambrose has observed, "were furious with Sherman Adams for not handing out enough jobs fast enough for their deserving constituents." Adams angered every supplicant who expected or wanted a "yes" and received a "no." The disappointed, not surprisingly, came largely from Republican ranks: from cabinet members wanting a presidential speech in support of a department initiative, from Republican congressmen seeking administration support for a pet project, from local party leaders wanting the president to campaign for Republican candidates, and from various Eisenhower supporters wanting some small favor.

Hamilton Jordan would not have won any popularity contests among Republicans, but his severest critics were Democrats, not Republicans. So intense was House Speaker Tip O'Neill's hostility toward Jordan that he took to calling him "Hannibal Jerkin," thus capturing what O'Neill perceived to be both Jordan's autocratic style and political ineptitude. Democratic Congressmen and members of the cabinet continually groused that Jordan "never returns a phone call." Even someone like Dick Cheney, who generally strove to be accommodating rather than confrontational in interpersonal relations, was the target of a considerable amount of internal carping, especially after a string of primary losses in May 1976. Many within the Ford White House, the most prominent of whom were presidential counselor Robert Hartmann and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, complained that Rumsfeld and Cheney came between them and the president. According to John Osborne, prominent cabinet members such as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Treasury Secretary William Simon, and Defense Secretary James Schlesinger also thoroughly "detested the White House staff under Rumsfeld and his successor, Richard Cheney." Their relationship with Rumsfeld and Cheney, Osborne wrote, was surrounded by a "welter of suspicion and hatred [and] the word hatred is justified." As an aide to Cheney explained, "Cheney ran the one 'pipeline' for political communications in and out of the White House and... many of the President's other advisers felt shut out of the political process."
Rumsfeld relates a trivial but telling example of the way in which he functioned as an internal lightning rod for Ford. A cabinet member came to Rumsfeld to complain about being left off the invitation list for a state dinner. Rumsfeld told the disgruntled cabinet member he would take the question to the president, which he did. Ford instructed Rumsfeld to leave the cabinet member off the list. Several days later the cabinet officer saw the president and mentioned that he was not on the list. Ford feigned surprise and told the cabinet officer he would see what he could do. That evening Rumsfeld received a note from the president, “Let’s put that fellow back on.” The result is the president gets to play the nice guy, while the chief of staff is seen as the bad guy who schemed to bump the cabinet member off the list. 120

John Sununu delivered and took his share of partisan hits, yet the most vitriolic attacks aimed at Sununu came from inside his own party. Senate Minority Whip Alan Simpson denounced Sununu as a “beady-eyed guy out there figuring out how to use” the budget talks “for political advantage.” 121 Robert Dole, the Senate minority leader, labeled Sununu “the chief of chaff.” 122 After Sununu dismissed Senator Trent Lott as “insignificant” to the process, an incensed Lott told reporters that Sununu “is going to have to crawl over here and BEG for [forgiveness]. . . . He just stuck the wrong pig.” 123 Newt Gingrich, meanwhile, was described as barely on speaking terms with Sununu. 124 House Minority Leader Robert Michel was more measured in his public comments, but an aide to Michel acknowledged that “our relationship with Sununu has been no bed of roses.” 125 As the relationship hit bottom at the end of 1990, the Washington Post reported that “angry Republicans want [Sununu’s] head.” 126 And by early 1991, Sununu’s “lagging relations” with key cabinet members close to Bush had become a prominent item in the national press. 127

Given that hostility to chiefs of staff so often arises from within the president’s own party and administration, it is little wonder that when chiefs of staff fall from grace they are often hurled into a political abyss. Fulfilling the role of internal lightning rod leaves a chief of staff with few allies and many intense enemies within his party and the administration. In contrast to cabinet secretaries, who typically spend large amounts of time and energy nurturing support from key constituencies within their party, chiefs of staff are aware that they have “a constituency of one.” 128

Sherman Adams’s precipitous fall from power was typical of the experience of many powerful chiefs of staff. When Adams got in trouble for accepting gifts from industrialist Bernard Goldfine, the opposition was the first to jump on the issue, but it was pressure from Republican ranks that ultimately produced Adams’s resignation. 129 As one administration member confided, “Mr. Adams is a difficult man to sympathize with.” 130 Adams’s dismissal, Robert Keith Gray points out, came less from the charges them-
selves than from “not building himself a cadre of support to lean on when trouble came.” What Gray does not say is that building such support is difficult for a person cast in the role of buffer between the president and those within the president’s own administration and party. However much Eisenhower might feel Adams was a valuable assistant, he also knew that no important political constituencies would be offended by dumping Adams, in marked contrast to the high costs among key political constituencies that would be incurred by jettisoning a Nixon or even a Benson.

Similarly, pressure for Don Regan’s removal in the wake of the Iran-contra revelations came more from Republicans than from Democrats. Republican Senator Larry Pressler demanded Regan’s immediate resignation, saying Regan “epitomizes the arrogance of power.” Republicans Richard Lugar and Robert Michel echoed Pressler’s call for Regan’s resignation. Regan had no constituency to which he could turn, having made many enemies and few friends during his two years as chief of staff. But Regan faced still another problem, one that plagues all chiefs of staff to a greater or lesser degree: an inflated reputation for power.

THE DOUBLE BIND OF EXAGGERATED POWER

In his memoirs, Don Regan complains bitterly that “somehow the press had got the idea that Poindexter, and MacFarlane before him, had reported to me and I was therefore responsible for their performance. I explained that neither man had ever worked for me, but there was no dispelling this mistaken idea.” Why was there no dispelling this “mistaken idea?” Why were reporters not prepared to accept Regan’s version that he had no knowledge of the Iran-contra connection? Regan’s answer: “They had heard that I was an autocrat who knew . . . when every sparrow fell on the White House lawn.” Although true, this begs the question of where reporters and other political elites got this mistaken impression. Regan’s effort to pin the blame for his image as “an ex officio prime minister” on “a press campaign” ignores his own role in fostering this myth.

No public official, of course, can be held entirely responsible for his public image. Some get tagged with an undeserved image that, try as they might, they cannot shake. One thinks, for instance, of Gerald Ford’s undeserved reputation as a klutz. The mass media, no doubt, by favoring instant analysis over cautious reflection, are not always good at separating fact from fiction. But more than media malice or miscue is responsible for the inflated estimates of Don Regan’s power. Regan’s reputation for power was exaggerated for many of the same reasons that the reputations of Sherman Adams, H. R. Haldeman, and John Sununu were inflated in contemporary
press accounts: many political actors, including the chief of staff and the president, have an interest in exaggerating that power.

In order to be effective, senior staffers must persuade other officials that they have the authority to speak for the president. To function successfully as a “headknocker,” for instance, a staffer must have sufficient prestige within the White House that the disputants will accept the staffer’s decision rather than appeal to the president. Because the effectiveness of a senior staffer depends on others within the administration respecting that staffer’s power, an incentive exists for staffers to exaggerate (or to permit others to exaggerate) their reputation for power. The dilemma for the senior staff person is that an inflated reputation for power also means, as Don Regan found out, being held accountable for things outside one’s control.

Presidents, too, have an incentive to acquiesce in having their chiefs of staff portrayed as more powerful and autonomous than in fact they are. Not only does it mean fewer appeals to the president but, as political scientist Bruce Buchanan points out, it means that the president can “use his own power without paying the price for doing so.” If others believe the chief of staff exercises considerable discretion, they will be more inclined to blame the staffer and absolve the president for policies they disagree with or that have gone awry. If a congressman gets turned away at the president’s door, it is in the president’s interest that the congressmen “go away thinking that that S.O.B. at the door kept him out instead of that that S.O.B. on the other side of the door didn’t want to see him.”

Other public officials within and outside the administration have a strong incentive to exaggerate a chief of staff’s power because it allows them to criticize presidential policy without directly criticizing the president. Exaggerating the power of senior staff enables disgruntled elites to express displeasure with the current direction of the administration without personally affronting the president. Thus critics of administration policy, the president, and the chief of staff himself all play a role in creating the overestimation of a chief of staff’s power.

Regan’s claim that “because I was not in fact a prime minister, but a servant of the Presidency, I did not think it mattered what the press wrote and said about me” is not just naive but disingenuous. Regan found that a reputation for near-total mastery of the White House improved his own strategic position as well as suited President Reagan’s desire to remain aloof from day-to-day management squabbles and policy conflicts. Opponents undoubtedly did exaggerate Regan’s power for their own purposes, but Regan made no effort to rectify the inflated estimation of his position. On the contrary, many of his actions seemed calculated to foster such an inflated reputation.

After Bitburg, Regan clearly indicated to other elites that such fiascoes would not recur because in the future he, Don Regan, would assume control over the president’s schedule. Regan’s aides told Bernard Weinraub of the New
That Regan had decided “to be more careful in watching the schedule, to be in full charge.” According to Weinraub, “Mr. Regan plainly seeks to send a signal across the Administration that he is in total control over Mr. Reagan’s schedule.” When Regan found out that President Reagan and King Hussein were answering reporters’ questions, Regan immediately summoned Speakes to his office and demanded to know: “Why don’t I know about this? . . . Damn it, I’m in charge of scheduling around here, and anybody that’s going to do anything like that has to get my approval. . . . Don’t you ever let this happen again.” On another occasion, when Regan’s driver informed him there had been a small fire at the White House, Regan exploded at one of his aides: “Dammit! I’m the chief of staff! I’ve got to know when these things happen! . . . You guys have got to keep me posted on these things and I don’t want this ever to happen again.” Upon Poindexter’s appointment as national security assistant, Regan was quoted as telling Poindexter “that he didn’t like surprises, he wanted to be told what’s going on.” Regan’s insistence on being seen as the person who knew everything that was going on in the White House meant, as William Niskanen sagely foresaw, “there’s no way for him to avoid responsibility for every mistake.”

Regan apparently made no effort to stop friendly White House aides from talking to the press about his control over White House operations. One Regan aide boasted, “Don has positioned himself to be an extremely powerful chief of staff who’s in charge of the whole show.” Another aide agreed: “Don is clearly in charge. He sees the staff as his staff. He’s the one the President relies on.” “Everyone works for Regan,” agreed a third aide, who praised Regan because “he understands that all the power centers need to be subservient to him.” Given the image propagated by his aides, it is little wonder that, as Regan complained at one point, “if someone gets a cold in this town, I get blamed.” Little wonder, too, that after the Iran-contra revelations, the press insisted that Regan “cannot escape responsibility for recent developments by feigning noninvolvement.” Or that 65 percent of the American people believed Regan knew “that money from the Iranian arms sales was going to help the contras.” As a former White House aide explained, “Don Regan would never have got in this trouble if he hadn’t gone around telling everyone that he ran everything and knew everything.” For chiefs of staff no less than for presidents, a reputation for knowing everything means being blamed even for those things one knows little or nothing about.

IS A CHIEF OF STAFF NECESSARY?

Gerald Ford entered the presidential office determined not “to have a powerful chief of staff . . . [and instead] be my own chief of staff.” Along with many others in Washington, Ford felt that the lesson to be learned from Wa-
tere gate was that a hierarchical White House organized around a chief of staff dangerously isolates the president from diverse ideas and information. His experience as a legislator reinforced his preference for a “spokes of the wheel” system in which he would be the wheel’s hub. The president would thus be assured of multiple sources of information and senior aides would be guaranteed direct access to the president. 156

Within two months, however, the much ballyhooed “spokes of the wheel” structure was being phased out. Ford quickly recognized the validity of what his top aides had been telling him for several months: without some person acting as a funnel, the president would be overloaded with unwanted information and unwelcome visitors. “Everyone,” Ford later explained, “wanted a portion of my time.” Ford’s answer was to bring Donald Rumsfeld into the White House to serve as staff coordinator and gatekeeper. As Ford explained to the assembled staff shortly after Rumsfeld’s appointment as assistant to the president, “The responsibility is on you to work through Don . . . [and to] make sure that Don is cognizant of what is happening.” By the end of 1974, Dick Cheney (then Rumsfeld’s deputy) recalls, “we were really, without ever formally announcing it, back to a model that was very close to the Haldeman model.” Disgruntled staff agreed that Rumsfeld was “another Bob Haldeman, only he smiles.” 157

Much the same evolution of roles occurred, albeit more slowly, in the Carter White House. Like Ford, Carter entered office committed to being his own chief of staff. Ignoring the Ford administration’s unsuccessful experiment with the “spokes of the wheel” concept, the people around Carter fixated instead on the centralized structure of the Nixon White House they deemed to be partially responsible for Watergate. 158 Fearing, as Press Secretary Jody Powell explained, that “an excessively powerful White House staff in general and a chief of staff in particular, . . . would tend to choke off the flow of information to the president,” 159 Carter opted for much the same organizational structure of direct access to the president that Ford had tried and discarded. Jack Watson, who served briefly as Carter’s chief of staff in 1980, explains that Carter “felt very strongly that he didn’t want to set up any barriers or obstacles between the free and full expression of opinion to him directly from Stu, Jack, Hamilton, Jody, Frank. And, he didn’t want it to be filtered.” 160 It took Carter two years to reach essentially the same conclusion that Ford had reached in two months: filtered information might be bad but unfiltered information is worse.

Distress signals emerged among senior White House staffers almost from the outset. In the fall of 1977, Hamilton Jordan asked for a written opinion on the advisability of selecting a chief of staff. The answer he got back from A. D. Frazier, a staff person from the president’s reorganization project, was that “designating someone as chief of staff or better, as staff coordinator, would be most helpful to the President.” Shortly thereafter, Eizenstat wrote
to the president: "I continue to believe that our most serious structural problem is the lack of internal White House coordination. . . . No one has been given the directive to sort out the various priorities of our work, to coordinate our work and make sure it is all going in the same direction, before it all pours in to you." Finally in July 1979, Carter relented to his advisers' pleas and appointed Jordan as chief of staff.

Former members of the Carter administration today seem almost unanimous in concluding that not having a chief of staff was a mistake. "Without question," Eizenstat admits, "one of the most serious errors that was made, I would say near fatal error, was not having a chief of staff." The White House, Eizenstat flatly declares, "cannot function properly without a strong and effective chief of staff." Jack Watson agrees that Carter "should have designated a chief of staff almost immediately." Even Jody Powell now concedes that "we should have had . . . a chief of staff. [It] could have saved time for everybody, including the president." Natural experiments are rare in politics, and rarer still in a field like the presidency that is so open to personal idiosyncrasy and historical contingency. This makes the Carter and Ford experiences that much more noteworthy. For here are two presidents, of vastly different political backgrounds, personalities, and operating styles who both, for different reasons, came into office predisposed against the idea of a chief of staff. Ford resisted the chief of staff concept because his extensive congressional experience had taught him the value of exposing oneself to diverse sources, and Carter resisted because of his desire "to be on top of everything, to manage everything, to know everything." That both men nevertheless ended up appointing a chief of staff forces one to ask whether the chief of staff is not a functional necessity in today's presidency.

A number of presidential scholars have reached precisely this conclusion. Even those like Richard Neustadt, who once vigorously opposed the idea of a chief of staff, now concede that "in administrative terms [a chief of staff], or something like it, has become a practical necessity." Michael Medved concurs that "a central figure on the staff—whether he is called White House Secretary, Staff Coordinator, Assistant President, or Chief of Staff—is necessary for the efficient functioning of the White House." "chiefs are necessary," echoes Samuel Popkin, "because a president's time must be rationed, decisions must be paced, and access by the staff and cabinet need to be refereed." The startling rapidity with which "lessons" of the presidency are learned, unlearned, and relearned leads one to regard any "iron laws" or "functional requisites" of the presidency with a healthy skepticism. Still it is striking that a position that so many people have deplored continues to persist in the modern presidency. Future presidents could with profit follow Reagan's first-term model and opt not to concentrate power in the hands of a single
chief of staff, but Carter and Ford’s experiences teach us that it would be unwise for any future president to try, in the manner of Franklin Roosevelt or John Kennedy, to be his own chief of staff.

A president cannot be his own chief of staff for reasons that go beyond the crushing administrative burdens of running the modern presidency. Given the ever-increasing number of groups that look to the presidency for solutions to problems, modern presidents cannot afford to become involved in, let alone be held responsible for, all the problems that are dumped at the White House door. The president, as the Brownlow report stated, does need help. But that help cannot come only in the form of anonymous administrative aides, tirelessly toiling in the president’s shadow. For in today’s political environment, presidents also need top aides who can share the glare of the limelight, speak for the president, say “no” for the president, and take the blame for the president. A president who tries to do all or much of this himself will become personally embroiled in too many political disputes and will find himself increasingly unable to sustain political support inside Washington and in the country as a whole.