The Truman White House
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Published by University Press of Kansas

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President Truman inherited me from the Roosevelt staff. I had been on detail from the Office of War Information to Jonathan Daniels, administrative assistant to President Roosevelt. My duties were to provide Daniels with a running analysis of racial tensions and of developing situations of potential racial violence. I did this from 1943 until his appointment as press secretary only a few weeks before Mr. Roosevelt’s death. At that point, I was assigned to David K. Niles to continue the same work, and that is where I was when F.D.R. died. Thus, Mr. Truman inherited an office and people he knew very little about.

Early in Mr. Truman’s term, Niles was asked to prepare a memo outlining the functions of his office, which he asked me to write. As I recall, it was not a very full memo, for Mr. Niles—being very much a telephone type—was never keen on committing his operations to paper. Fortunately the president had his own means of testing us, for very quickly in his administration, the entire appropriations for the war were held up by a filibuster over the continued existence of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. The guts of the Niles operation was close liaison with liberal and labor organizations of all kinds, but particularly those that were influential along the Washington–New York–Boston axis. The FEPC question was eventually compromised with a six-month terminal appropriation rather than one for a full year. In terms of the staffing of the White House operations, what the appropriations budget had exposed was Niles’s sense of timing and thorough knowledge of the Left-liberal organizations. But this was also a time of testing the new president who was as unknown to us as we were to him. Would he stand up under the filibuster? Would he accept, as Mr. Roosevelt had done, Niles’s “ambassadorship” to the third-party movement in New York? Would he recognize the need to use it as a counterforce to the conservative congressional coalition that was riding high after Roosevelt’s death? Some liberals had dared to support the FEPC as long as they could ride
on F.D.R.'s coattails, but now they were fading rapidly. It is all history today. Truman did stand up; he refused to be intimidated by the filibuster or panic in the face of a war financed by a continuing resolution. FEPC was saved, though with a shortened life, and Niles and I agreed (between ourselves) to sign up for the duration.

Race relations were my bag. Niles knew the Jewish organizations and the labor-liberal coalition, and we divided up the field. Our method of operation continued without much change from that time until Niles became very sick in 1950 and, after a lingering illness, died in 1952. Don Dawson supervised my work until Niles's death; I was on my own—in the sense of reporting directly to the president—only for the final month.

With reference to the organization of the Truman staff and how it conducted itself and how we related to our colleagues, the style was basically set by Niles. Someone said that while administrative assistants were intended under the 1939 reorganization to have a "passion for anonymity," in Niles's case it was a mania. He conducted direct negotiations with old friends and colleagues in all the major departments and agencies. He visited with the president privately and seldom, if ever, attended staff meetings. He put as little as possible in his files and stripped them annually in celebration of the New Year. He felt awkward as a writer (though I saw nothing wrong with his style) and often asked me to prepare written documents for him. He was always gone from mid week to Monday mornings, attending board meetings of New York-based organizations that concerned his liaison duties, taking in a play on Thursday nights (he was a passionate theatre-goer), and always returning home Fridays for a family dinner with his mother. Weekends he devoted to the Ford Hall Forum, Boston's famous Sunday night lecture-debate on controversial public issues. Mr. Niles had been the forum manager since the Sacco-Vanzetti days, and he kept up his active participation in its affairs as long as his strength held out. The overnight train after the forum on Sunday brought him to Washington and a renewal of his weekly rounds.

Dave's privacy was complete. He took no one with him when he met with the president or any of his colleagues "across the street." (We were housed in Old State—now the Executive Office Building—by Dave's preference; we were out of sight there and he preferred it that way.) Nevertheless, I was aware that Mr. Truman had grown very fond of Dave and that he trusted him completely to deal with the liberal Establishment. Handwritten scrawls by the president on various communications he sent to Dave showed that Mr. Truman felt baffled by New York City's intricacies and machinations. The ideologues troubled him and he relied on Dave to handle them.
Dave's trust in me was also complete within my area of competence. He expected to be kept informed and was most unhappy the few times he was taken by surprise. Generally speaking, trust, confidence, and privacy were the pattern, and success in the program plus a low profile were all that were required.

What was the rule inside our office was also the rule in our relations with others on the White House staff. They had their work and we had ours. We should not try to do "theirs" lest they try to do "ours." Hill contacts, newspaper contacts, agency and departmental contacts were fine; but there was to be no publicity. There were a few times when the preparation of legislation or the drafting of a presidential statement required our help and I was sent for, but only if Mr. Niles was not immediately available.

It should be clear that the Minorities Office (if that is what we were) was a rather isolated operation and, in that respect, rather different from the rest of the White House staff. The one-to-one relation between Mr. Niles and the president meant that assignments and instructions came directly to him and were not necessarily shared with colleagues. This had its obvious disadvantages, but it kept both of us aloof from most staff tensions. It also kept me free, more or less automatically, of the perennial difficulty of the White House staffer: getting caught between a presidential decision and a cabinet officer.

The emphasis on survival came from more than Dave's temperament. He was acutely aware that we were operating in a highly controversial area. One of the reasons why there had never been a permanent race relations agency in government was that none had ever survived very long. In that sense my work for Mr. Truman under Niles's direction was only a continuation of what I had done for Jonathan Daniels during the Roosevelt administration. Daniels had developed a series of low visibility relationships with the necessary departments to deal with the problem of racial tensions and the prevention of domestic violence during the war. Specifically at Mr. Roosevelt's direction, Daniels formed an interdepartmental committee that never met. The members, assigned by the cabinet departments, knew they were to report to him regularly and to be available on call, but they never got together in one room. They had a common function, but no visible structure. I helped put this "committee" together and was able to continue some of its functions in a liaison capacity for Mr. Truman.

Thus, programs of employment, advancements, information, contract compliance, and the like, involving minority groups, were developed in nearly all government agencies during Mr. Truman's administration. I was able to keep in touch with these programs via the special assistants.
These were mostly blacks, both men and women, who served in many
departments and independent agencies, reporting directly to the head,
with general responsibilities in the area of civil rights. This arrangement
originally came into being just before World War II to deal with Negro
protests about discrimination in the War Department and later in the
Defense Department. In the minority world during World War II these
assistants were known as the "black cabinet." Throughout the war years,
I was in daily touch with these individuals, and during the Truman
years, I worked with them or their successors on their programs. They
received no instructions from me, of course, but I kept in touch with
what they were doing and saw to it that Dave Niles and, through him,
the president were kept informed. Often I could be of help to them in
advancing their programs or in bringing additional resources into play.
But there was never any question of standing between the department
head and his staff or between the department head and the president. If
there was, I got out—or was taken out—quickly.

The last two years, 1951 and 1952, were different. Niles became
increasingly weaker, but such was Mr. Truman’s affection for him that
replacing him was out of the question. Mr. Truman indicated, however,
that he wanted me to do the work insofar as I was able, and that was
the way it was right up to December 1952. But only Dave could go to
those board meetings in New York! I could keep track of the rest in a
low-key way, and that is what I did. But I still had supervision, and
there was a big difference in style between Dave Niles and Don Dawson.
Don and I had a visit every morning immediately after the president’s
staff conference. We discussed plans and problems together, and I ex­
ecuted my part of them on my own, calling for help when I needed it.

As I look back on those years and think of the behind-the-scenes
way in which Dave and I worked, I have mixed thoughts. Dave came to
the White House staff with Jim Forrestal, Jim Rowe, and Laughlin
Currie. They all kept low profiles as long as they were in the White
House (though not necessarily afterwards). The days of press interviews,
public statements, and declared responsibilities came much later. In my
work for Roosevelt and Daniels and for Truman, Niles, and Dawson,
only a few people knew what I was doing and how I did it. The story
of the Daniels operation under F.D.R., for example, has never been fully
described. I continued the same philosophy in my work for Mr. Truman.
As far as I was concerned, only Niles, Dawson, and the president needed
to know, and my loyalty to them was complete. I was never asked to do
anything that would have hurt them or me if it had been made public.
But the national shift from segregation to integration, from discrimination
against minorities to participation by minorities was just beginning. The
forces lined up against Mr. Truman in the area of civil rights were very strong. The legislation President Truman asked for in his special message of February 1948 did not pass Congress until 1964. We took such action as was possible within the executive branch under already existing, but mostly unused, authorities. I do not think we would have made any progress at all if we had gone public. The conclusion is easy to arrive at. The tone of right and wrong is set for the staff and the administration by the president and no one else. (The high visibility of the Nixon staff, after all, did nothing to keep them open and above-board.) We were kept within bounds by Truman’s clear goals and by the strict standards he applied to the presidency. That standard of accountability is perhaps the best one.