ROBERT C. TURNER

My service in the Truman administration was relatively brief: two years (1946-48), followed by several summers and briefer stints at economic report season as an assistant to John Steelman, and about six months as a member of the Council of Economic Advisers. As an assistant to Steelman, I was a junior member of the White House staff and hence was not directly involved in the major policy debates. I did brief Steelman on policy issues either orally or by memorandum, but he “carried the ball” from there on. And my service on the council was at the end of Mr. Truman’s second term, when few initiatives were being undertaken. During those closing months, the council operated pretty much on its own with very little contact with the president, especially after the election when it was known that he would be succeeded by a Republican.

Although my opportunity to observe firsthand the management of the presidency by President Truman was quite limited, it is my clear impression that President Truman was his own chief of staff: He met with his few immediate staff assistants informally and frequently, and responsibilities were parceled out more or less functionally. It was my impression that no presidential assistant had authority over all other presidential assistants. This was true even though Mr. Steelman had the title “the” assistant to the president.

It is true that Mr. Steelman had primary responsibility for labor-management relations. (Incidentally, there was a tacit understanding between Mr. Steelman and myself that labor-management relations were not within my area of responsibility.) But his responsibilities also extended beyond. His role, as I saw it, was that of a coordinator and problem-solver within the executive branch, especially where conflicts among agencies were involved. In general, these coordinating and problem-solving activities were concerned with economic and regulatory matters of a fairly specific character: for example, winding down war-
time controls; disposing of surplus property (merchant ships, synthetic rubber facilities, etc.); coping with the shortage of freight cars; and formulating policy with respect to the strategic and critical materials stockpile, the housing program, government loans, subsidy programs, price controls, etc. A complete list would be extremely long and highly varied. It would include a great many, if not most, of the problems that typically arise in the day-to-day functioning of the executive branch, including the activities of the regulatory agencies.

In addition, he served as a conciliator to maintain good working relations both within the government and with outsiders. He had a constant stream of visitors (congressmen, agency heads, business executives, representatives of interest groups) with a point of view or a complaint that they wanted heard by the White House. Mr. Steelman had an amazing ability to listen sympathetically to these visitors, acquire or maintain their good will, and send them on their way, satisfied that they had a personal friend in court—but to do so without committing himself to any particular course of action other than to follow up on the matter. Action would follow, but only after the matter had been "staffed out," checked with the president if it was of enough importance, and a solution worked out with the persons and agencies concerned. Thus, Steelman did not act as an alter ego to the president; he never made decisions in the president's name as Sherman Adams did in the Eisenhower administration. Rather, Steelman tried to negotiate acceptable solutions to problems that came to the White House so that they would not have to go to the president for a decision. Occasional exceptions arose, of course, when there were irresolvable conflicts or when the matter was of such importance that the president needed to be personally involved.

Mr. Steelman considered overall economic policy to be within his area of responsibility, but I do not really know how much of a role he played. I do know that in drafting presidential messages to Congress and certain public addresses that involved economic matters, he usually asked me to serve as his proxy. Charlie Murphy took the lead in drafting most of these papers, and sometimes I felt that I was working for Murphy almost as much as for Steelman—though I made it a point to touch base with Steelman regularly. I do not recall that he ever disagreed with positions I took.

The 1947 and 1948 Economic Reports, drafted by the Council of Economic Advisers, were officially published over the signature of the president in their entirety (in contrast to later reports in which the president's part was the first twenty-five or thirty pages, followed by the fuller report to the president over the signature of the council members). Perhaps for this reason, President Truman wanted those reports to be
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thoroughly gone over and rewritten as necessary by members of the White House staff. Murphy and Steelman were jointly assigned that responsibility, and they in turn delegated the job in substantial part to David Bell and myself. Bell and I worked in complete harmony on this assignment, even though it involved some conflict with the council members. To the best of my recollection, Steelman never took exception to the work we did. The principal function of the Economic Reports, however, was to provide technical and analytical support for economic policy decisions that had evolved during prior months—decisions in which the council had participated chiefly via discussions with the White House staff. Rarely, as I recall, was the Economic Report used as a launching vehicle for proposing major, new economic policy actions.

One incident, however, may throw a bit of light on a narrow segment of policy-making in this area. The White House staff had drafted a message or speech (I do not recall which) in the field of foreign affairs. Because economic matters were involved, though in minor degree, I was a member of the drafting team. When the draft was completed, following usual procedures (which I will come to), the president called a meeting to discuss the draft with the cabinet members primarily concerned. It was the consensus of those present that the draft was not satisfactory. The president asked Dean Acheson, then secretary of state, personally to supervise the job of redrafting. We adjourned to another room and Mr. Acheson, almost single-handedly, reworked that draft into a far superior paper with quite a different policy tone. I was tremendously impressed with Mr. Acheson's breadth of knowledge and his sheer brilliance. It was obvious to me that the president knew what he was doing when he asked Mr. Acheson to take on that assignment. Mr. Truman had an extraordinarily high degree of respect for and confidence in Dean Acheson and relied on him heavily for policy guidance.

Very often policy decisions were made in the process of drafting presidential messages to the Congress or major public addresses. The immediate presidential assistants would discuss with the president the general position he wanted to take. Then, often under the direction of Murphy, a drafting team would be organized, its composition varying with the subject matter. A day or two of discussion would yield a preliminary outline. The outline would be divided up among members of the team for study and preliminary drafting. Issues would be discussed with top staff people in the agencies concerned. The contributions of the several members of the team would be combined into a very preliminary draft and duplicated. Successive drafts would follow, each a product of group authorship. When the draft was believed to be in fairly acceptable form (or sometimes even before), top staff members of the agencies
concerned would be asked to join the team for a further redrafting ses-
sion. Then the ensuing redraft would be duplicated and circulated for
comment to the relevant agency heads, who no doubt turned to their top
staff people for advice. With these comments, further redrafting was
necessary. This method of obtaining agency advice, incidentally, may
well have been more effective than a formally collegial cabinet meeting.
Agency representatives felt much freer to express their objections force­
fully to the White House staff than they (or even the agency heads)
would have to the president himself.

When it was thought that the draft was near finished form, it would
be submitted to the president. Typically, he would then call a meeting
of the cabinet members and other agency heads concerned (often includ­
ing some of those only peripherally involved) to discuss the draft. If it
was a speech, he would sometimes read it aloud. He would solicit com­
ments from those present. By and large, however, agency views had
already been reflected—though not necessarily incorporated—in the
draft under review. He would referee any remaining disputes and iden­
tify changes that he himself wanted to make. The next draft was final if
the president found it satisfactory.

Certain very important policy decisions obviously were made with­
out any written documentation. But many were made in the process of
drafting messages to the Congress or formal public addresses. My pur­
pose in describing our drafting procedure is to emphasize that policy­
making of the latter type was indeed collegial. The White House staff
did the work of putting successive drafts together, but hundreds of
knowledgeable people, including the relevant agency heads and their top
staff, contributed to the process. Although the president made the final
decisions, he had the benefit of the views not only of his own staff, but
of virtually all of those legitimately concerned with the subject at hand.

Although the president did not call many cabinet meetings, the
notion that he did not involve the cabinet and other agency heads in the
policy-making process is, I believe, incorrect. Clearly, he listened to some
advisers with more respect than others, but much, if not most, of the
“non-crisis” decision-making in the Truman administration was genuinely,
if not overtly, collegial in character.