The Truman White House

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Questions have been raised about the structure of President Truman’s staff and particularly whether he had a chief of staff. The answer to this is no. The president, through his regular morning staff meetings, eliminated the need for a chief of staff.

The titles of various staff members described in broad terms their primary duties—press secretary, appointments secretary, correspondence secretary, and so on. Many other tasks were assigned to members of the staff on an ad hoc basis. However remote, these usually had some relation to the member’s primary responsibility. I will give some examples.

I was assigned the task of acting as a coordinator of federal maritime affairs, working principally with government claims of overpayment of construction subsidies to several of our largest shipping lines. Many departments of the government are involved in federal maritime matters—principally Justice, Commerce, Labor, State, and Defense. The president gave me the job probably because ships and defense matters were involved.

In another area, I recall the time when Louis Johnson closed a naval hospital at Long Beach. This caused a widespread adverse public reaction because this hospital was involved in treating paraplegic veterans. I was given the job of chairing a committee, which included Dr. Howard Rusk and Dr. Howard Abramson, to get matters straightened out. Our efforts led to certain changes within the medical division of the Veterans Administration and indeed in the VA itself.

Here the basic difficulty arose through closing a naval hospital, so the president again assigned the clean-up task to me.

I am sure other staff members had the same experience with ad hoc assignments. In my case they occupied a great deal more time than the protocol and liaison duties of a naval aide. I could not have begun to handle these assigned duties without the wholehearted, highly professional assistance and advice I received from the Bureau of the Budget.
Jim Webb, Elmer Staats, and Roger Jones were some of those I remember best. Of course the members of the president's staff helped each other; to me, working with such a group was tremendously rewarding.

While it is true that the president had no chief of staff, either designated or "acting," the commander in chief did have a chief of staff. Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy was chief of staff to the commander in chief under Roosevelt and subsequently under Truman. Because of his position and relative seniority, he was presiding officer at the meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Under the National Security Act of 1947 the Joint Chiefs organization was given statutory recognition; and when the position of chairman was established, General of the Army Omar Bradley became the first chairman.

Before Admiral Leahy left the White House, President Truman called us to meet with him. He told Admiral Leahy that he wanted arrangements made so that all the information that Admiral Leahy had been receiving from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department, the Atomic Energy Commission, and so forth should be sent to me so that I could carry on with the briefings as Admiral Leahy had previously done. Again, although this task was outside the normal duties of a naval aide, the assignment was a logical one.

I feel I should attempt to explain certain attitudes and characteristics of the president as I saw them. My explanations may help resolve or clarify some seeming inconsistencies or conflicting views in the record.

The general impression created by the president was that he was simple, honest, forceful, and direct. All these adjectives apply except for "simple." He was the most complex man I have ever known and the most interesting. It was only after about two years of association that I felt I had his full confidence. Still, no matter what his worries or concerns were, he always appeared patient and willing to listen to other people's problems.

He also had a strong sense of custodial responsibility for the office of the presidency and was ready to protect all the powers of this office.

President Truman saw himself in three distinct and separate roles—first as president of all the people, second as commander in chief of the armed forces, and third as the leader of the Democratic party. He always knew in his words or actions which of these roles he was portraying. The one possible exception was his 1948 nonpolitical transcontinental railroad trip, which had strong overtones of domestic politics.

He sometimes carried this separation to extremes. For example, in various inscriptions to me, he consistently refers to himself as "Your Commander in Chief" or "Your former Commander in Chief."
On several occasions I heard the president mention an incident he had witnessed in World War I involving the reprimand of an officer by his senior before the officer's own troops. This disgusted and dismayed the president; and he pointed out to me that when the president reprimanded someone, it came from the court of last resort and the poor victim had no place to go.

Only once did I hear the president reprimand anyone. On this occasion I was briefing the president in his office when a staff member came in to report something to him. The president was incensed and spoke up in strong terms. The staff member immediately left and the president turned to me and said, "Bob, it hurt me to do that but it had to be done." I am sure he was right.

I have been with the president on occasions when he had what appeared to me to be a perfectly normal and amiable conversation with a caller. After the caller left, he would say to me, in effect, "I certainly set him straight," or, "I let him have it." The president's remarks seemed to me to have no conceivable relation to the conversation I had just heard. He may have been commenting on what he wished he had said or perhaps his words were too subtle for me to understand.

James Byrnes, then secretary of state, made a trip to Moscow in December 1945. On his return he stopped in New York City and made a strong policy statement before consulting with the president. Dean Acheson told me that Byrnes had told him that when he, Byrnes, later reported to the president they had a normal, friendly talk, no scoldings, no strong words. On the other hand, the president told Acheson that he had told Byrnes in no uncertain terms what he thought of his behavior.

One footnote on the president's distaste for reprimands. During a chat with the president I mentioned my admiration for Justice Holmes and noted that most of his minority opinions had, through the years, become the majority opinions on the Court. The president said he had no use for Holmes; his reason was that Holmes had bullied and humiliated young, inexperienced attorneys appearing before the Court.

There may be a general impression that the president made many "off-the-cuff" decisions; relieving General MacArthur is often given as one example. In this case, however, the president followed his standard procedure.

I once asked the president what his decision-making process was. He explained to me that his procedure involved four steps.

First, get all the facts you can, remembering that you seldom will have all the facts. If you do, the decision will be almost automatic.

Second, consult your trusted advisers but remember that the secretary of state is going to see the problem in the light of national policy.
considerations and the secretary of defense from the standpoint of national defense, etc. This may explain why some advisers left the president’s office thinking each had sold his point of view as the solution to the problem, while the president had accepted it only as one factor in reaching his final decision.

Third, after gathering the facts and consulting with advisers, go off by yourself, evaluate your advice, and make your decision. (Up to this point there seems to be nothing unusual in the president’s procedure. The method is almost standard. However, the president explained to me that the final point was the most important.)

Fourth, having made the decision, never look back. Go on to the next one.

Considering the many difficult, vital decisions that President Truman made, it seems evident that he was able to follow his own decision-making procedure.

I will end with a few brief remarks on the president’s views concerning the cabinet and National Security Council.

There were some, James Forrestal for one, who believed that the cabinet should follow the British example with a cabinet secretariat, a formal agenda, prepared position papers, etc. I attended only a few cabinet meetings. They seemed to me to be rather dreary affairs with little being accomplished. I gathered from what the president told me that this was the way he wanted it. He didn’t want anything resembling an executive committee. He felt he could meet with individual cabinet members any time he felt it was necessary and that that should suffice.

The National Security Council came into being during President Truman’s administration. I gathered from things he told me that he felt it was rather unnecessary. He explained to me that he could control the council by controlling the agenda for its meetings; and furthermore, when he chaired the meetings, he could control the trend and results of discussions. I have seen him do this and it was a great performance.

Working for and with the president (commander in chief) and with my colleagues was one of the most interesting and valuable experiences of my life. I learned more from President Truman than from any other man I ever knew, and I am forever grateful.