

# **The Office of the Chief of Staff in the Obama White House**

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## I. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHIEFS OF STAFF

Since 1979, all presidents have had a formal chief of staff to help them manage the White House.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Considerable research has examined the variety of roles that chiefs of staff and their immediate aides perform. Over time, several major duties have emerged, capturing among them the key responsibilities of chiefs of staff.<sup>1</sup> We highlight four roles that chiefs typically assume: *administrator*, *guardian*, *advisor*, and *proxy*. Neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive, these roles often overlap. For example, effective administration may produce mutually informing flows of advice, while helping guard a president's scarce time and attention. Other times, the roles may pull in different directions. The chief of staff must frequently say no; yet if other staffers are too consistently thwarted, it may dampen their commitment and suggestions of creative ideas and strategies while encouraging competition fueled by personal ambition.

### A. Managerial Roles

Two roles of chiefs of staff—administrator and guardian—encompass myriad tasks. Most fundamentally, the chief is the manager of the White House. Some presidents have tried to become deeply involved in the day-to-day running of the White House organization, but most learn that it is not a good use of their time. Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton went through an initial period in which they relied on a “spokes-of-the-wheel” arrangement, which placed them at the center of everything. The two finally accepted that having a strong chief of staff was a better option.

#### 1. Administrator

At its most basic, the chief of staff as administrator oversees the White House political and policy processes and manages the president's time and attention. Chiefs of staff are responsible for the operation of the White House Office and often are blamed if processes fail, much as Chief of Staff Denis McDonough and the Obama White House discovered with the flawed roll-out of Healthcare.gov. White House units, sometimes with the exception of the national security advisor, are expected to report to and through the chief of staff. What has been called the “standard model” of the White House decision making system, based on principles of inclusion and multiple advocacy, operates out of the chief of staff's office.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, chiefs of staff are responsible for myriad other administrative tasks, including selection and guidance of White House personnel, staff organization, and controlling flows of people and communications. To pursue these, most chiefs of staff rely, on the one hand, on the

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., see David B. Cohen, Karen M. Hult, & Charles E. Walcott, “White House Evolution and Institutionalization: The Office of Chief of Staff since Reagan.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* Vol. 46, #1 (March 2016): 4-29.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Charles E. Walcott and Karen M. Hult, “White House Structure and Decision Making: Elaborating the Standard Model,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35 (June 2005): 303-18.

overall White House hierarchy that their office directs. Specialized, typically hierarchical subsidiary structures gather information and issue guidance. These arrangements contribute to helping ensure staff accountability and consistent administration messages.

On the other hand, such channels often are complemented by regular meetings of administration officials, located within and outside of the chief of staff's office. These sessions also serve as venues for exchanging intelligence, dividing work, issuing orders, and at least quasi-resolving disagreements. For example, under President Obama, Chief of Staff McDonough presided over daily half-hour meetings of the senior staff at 7:45 a.m. followed by a larger meeting of approximately 30 senior and mid-level aides; at these sessions McDonough directed staffers to take specific actions, which he closely monitored to assure their completion.<sup>3</sup>

## *2. Guardian*

Part of the chief of staff's job is screening the information, issues, and individuals that reach the Oval Office. Generally, chiefs of staff are charged with protecting the president's time and their interests from an intrusive news media, a bothersome Congress, wayward administration members, or even the consequences of the president's own actions. Chiefs of staff frequently must perform unpopular tasks such as firing personnel, saying "no" to specific requests, and generally acting as the president's enforcer. Finally, chiefs of staff are expected to eschew credit-claiming for White House successes, but to take the blame when things go awry.

## **B. Policy and Politics**

Two other roles that chiefs of staff perform emphasize more substantive activities. Chiefs of staff frequently are advisors, presidential proxies, or both.

### *1. Advisor*

Chiefs of staff are usually an important political and policy advisor to the president. As a conduit to POTUS for much of the rest of the staff and administration, the chief often acts as an "honest broker," assuring that the president is exposed to a range of relevant opinions and expertise. Still, the COS is expected to hold and share their own unfiltered opinions when the president solicits them.

Although relationships between presidents and chiefs of staff have varied, most chiefs have become integral members of the inner circle of advisors to whom the president listens to most closely. This can be crucial, since chiefs often are the last people presidents see before they make important decisions.

Additionally, a chief of staff's capacity to serve as an advisor depends on their experience and expertise. A chief of staff who had been a member of Congress—such as Howard Baker,

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<sup>3</sup> Lloyd Grove, "Obama's Chief of Staff Denis McDonough and Scandals He Faces," *Newsweek* May 23, 2013. <https://www.newsweek.com/2013/05/22/obamas-chief-staff-denis-mcdonough-and-scandals-he-faces-237394.html> (accessed December 23, 2020)].

Leon Panetta, or Rahm Emanuel—almost certainly will be a trusted advisor on legislative matters.

## 2. *Proxy*

Chiefs of staff must frequently stand in for POTUS. They may assume a range of activities, such as meeting and negotiating with members of Congress and speaking to constituency groups.

A key dimension of the proxy role is interacting with the media. The extent and nature of any particular chief of staff's activities as proxy may reflect lack of presidential interest in engaging in these activities, strategic decisions about appropriate expenditures of presidential time and energy, or growing demands for a presidential presence. Such involvement, of course, also likely includes consideration of an individual chief's skills, time, and inclination. Perhaps most critical is the receptivity of those outside the White House to a chief of staff acting as a stand-in for a president. Chiefs of staff are more likely to be viewed as appropriate proxies if they are perceived to be close, trusted presidential advisors who accurately convey presidential priorities and values.

## II. CHIEFS OF STAFF IN THE OBAMA WHITE HOUSE

### A. Rahm Emanuel

#### 1. *Choosing Rahm*

Rahm Emanuel was not Barack Obama's first choice to be chief of staff. During the latter stages of the 2008 campaign, former Clinton chief of staff John Podesta called a transition meeting with Obama, two other former Clinton chiefs, Leon Panetta and Erskine Bowles, and a number of campaign advisers including Pete Rouse. At that meeting, Obama zeroed in on Rouse, his Senate chief of staff. Rouse declined, arguing that he was not right for the job and instead would be "better as the trusted guy Obama could call into the Oval Office to talk about tough issues, just one-on-one

Emanuel was scarcely a stranger to Barack Obama: they emerged together from the world of Chicago politics, were congressional colleagues having served as part of the Illinois delegation, and had a good working and personal relationship.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, Emanuel was yin to Obama's yang. Where Obama was calm, professional, detached, cerebral, and focused on the big picture, Emanuel was frenetic, temperamental, crude, involved, and emphasized tactical victories. Where Obama was inexperienced, somewhat naïve to the ways of Washington, and idealistic, Emanuel was the savvy, jaded Beltway veteran who knew how to work the system and cut deals to facilitate "putting points on the board."<sup>5</sup> The President evidently "was drawn to Mr.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Baker, "The Limits of Rahmism," *New York Times*, March 8, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Nicholas, "Rahm's Old School Ways in a New Era," *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 2010.

Emanuel's experience in both the White House and Congress and called him 'the whole package' of political acumen, policy chops and pragmatism. He is also a skilled compromiser."<sup>6</sup>

Emanuel became the first chief of staff in history to relinquish a seat in Congress to serve as chief. Only three other chiefs of staff up to that point—Donald Rumsfeld, Howard Baker, and Leon Panetta—had previously served in Congress, and only Rumsfeld and Panetta also had White House experience.

## *2. Office of the Chief of Staff under Emanuel*

The Obama administration continued the tradition, dating back to 1997, of naming two deputy chiefs of staff. And as under George W. Bush, the deputies had distinct titles. For the complete list of deputy chiefs of staff that worked in the Obama White House, as well as the number of employees that worked in the Office of the Chief of Staff, see Tables 2 and 3.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Jim Messina, former chief of staff for Representative Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND), Senator Max Baucus (D-MT), and the Obama campaign, was named deputy chief of staff for operations. As part of his portfolio, Messina supervised "the operational and political shops, overseeing the White House's interactions with the Secret Service, the scheduling office, the advance teams and the public liaison."<sup>7</sup> Given his experience in both houses of Congress, Messina also oversaw the congressional liaison unit. Mona Sutphen, a foreign policy expert who had worked as a special assistant to the national security assistant in the Clinton administration, became deputy chief of staff for policy. Her primary responsibility was overseeing and coordinating the various policy councils and the inter-agency process in the White House.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their different titles, the deputies' duties were similar. Indeed, the early Obama White House consciously removed the strict delineation of roles and responsibilities of the deputies instituted at the beginning of the Bush 43 presidency. Instead, a particular deputy or other White House principal or principals took the lead on a political, policy, or legislative matter depending upon the particular confluence of issues the White House was grappling with and the particular background of the principal(s). A more fluid, and at times volatile, process replaced the more static arrangements of the Bush years.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Leibovich, "Obama's Partisan, Profane Confidant Reigns It In," *New York Times*, January 25, 2009. Cf. Noam Scheiber, "The Chief: You Think It's So Great Being Rahm Emanuel?" *The New Republic*, March 3, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Anne E. Kornblut, "For Obama's Political Knots, He's the 'Fixer'; Low-Profile Aide Jim Messina Has Tackled Tough Problems," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Wilson, "Another World; Policy Chief Enters a New Phase," *Washington Post*, April 14, 2009.

Mona Sutphen recalled the way the Office of Chief of Staff differed from the previous two administrations: “their dividing line” between deputy chief of staff roles and responsibilities represented “a much starker division of labor and ours was definitely not that way.”<sup>9</sup>

The chief of staff’s office is located at the nexus of policy and politics in the White House; paper and people traverse the office in all modern administrations. The Obama White House under Emanuel was no different and it was central to administrative coordination. Sutphen recalled that anything of substance flowed through the office. When the President met with individuals in the Oval Office, the Chief or one of his deputies would likely attend:

The President consciously wanted to have some one-on-one meetings and would...say, ‘I want to be able to have just a one-on-one meeting with somebody.’ I’d say 99% of the time [that happened]...And it wasn’t always Rahm. He was actually quite egalitarian that way, which is, whoever was covering the issue, that was the person from the Chief of Staff’s Office who should sit in the meeting.<sup>10</sup>

Neither the Chief of Staff nor his office evidently was a bottleneck, however. Numerous staffers, most of whom had been with Obama on the campaign trail or worked for him in Congress, had independent access to the President. At times, these competing power centers caused friction between and among the staff and blurred the lines of access, influence, and policymaking.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Emanuel as Chief of Staff

Rahm Emanuel’s activities as chief of staff elicited few surprises to those familiar with his political career. He devoted much of his time to serving as presidential adviser and as proxy. Not shy about his own opinions impacting policy decisions, he was involved in all major policy initiatives, was a valued member of the inner circle, was a regular on the Sunday news show circuit, frequently canvassed the halls of the U.S. Capitol, and often played the bad cop to the President’s good. Emanuel also served as a presidential guardian, able to affect outcomes as information and people funneled through his office.

From the outset, the administration faced a number of domestic policy challenges. The nation’s automakers faced bankruptcy, the banking system bordered on collapse, and unemployment was rising.<sup>12</sup> Even without these crises, the Obama agenda would have been large. Emanuel was tasked with pushing the President’s big-ticket items through Congress. Less than a month after the inauguration, the largest economic stimulus program in U.S. history, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), passed and Emanuel refereed disputes within the administration over the size and nature of the stimulus.

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<sup>9</sup> David B. Cohen, “Interview with Mona Sutphen,” *The Chief of Staff Project*, September 20, 2011, p.2.

<sup>10</sup> David B. Cohen, “Interview with Mona Sutphen,” *The Chief of Staff Project*, September 20, 2011, pp.5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Included in were Senior Advisers David Axlerod and Valerie Jarrett, Counselor Pete Rouse, Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, and Vice President Joe Biden. See, e.g., Jodi Kantor, *The Obamas* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), p. 277

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Keith Koffler, “Emanuel Is Here, There, Everywhere,” *Roll Call*, May 21, 2009.

A similar pattern appeared in other legislative victories, including the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Emanuel “emerged as the leading foil.”<sup>13</sup> His high-visibility and willingness to make tough decisions in order to reach a deal on healthcare angered those on both the left and the right. He became a target of progressives who saw him as a traitor on key Democratic policies—always willing to trade and haggle away key progressive provisions in order to get legislation passed. Progressives blamed Emanuel for sacrificing the public option and Medicare negotiating rights in exchange for support by the insurance and pharmaceutical industry. Meanwhile, Republicans viewed him as the reason behind Obama’s waning inclination for bipartisanship. Arguably, however, this is exactly the role the chief of staff as guardian is supposed to perform, and the reason Obama hired Emanuel—to push the legislative agenda forward.

Yet, it probably is the *proxy* role that makes Emanuel’s tenure as chief of staff distinctive. All chiefs of staff represent the White House to Congress to varying degrees. Yet, the ubiquity with which Emanuel worked the Hill is legendary. In virtually all of the major legislative battles that occurred while he was in the White House, Emanuel took the lead in negotiating and moving the ACA through Congress. As one journalist noted: “The White House legislative strategy blends Obama’s vision and salesmanship with Emanuel’s granular political expertise and dealmaking skills.”<sup>14</sup>

The Chief of Staff’s handling of Congress largely continued the approach he had taken in House Democratic leadership: he was ever accessible and always present. Members of Congress, from both parties, had his personal cell phone number, and he talked constantly with legislative leaders. His morning exercise routine often involved a visit to the House gym where he buttonholed members.<sup>15</sup> His knowledge of the legislative process and attention to detail allowed him to oversee and shape legislative strategy on even the smallest of issues.

Emanuel was similarly accessible to the news media, embracing the role of media proxy. A frequent guest on political news shows, he used them to announce controversial policies or tactics of the administration with a level of candor that journalists found rare in Washington.<sup>16</sup> Emanuel was a very public face of the administration, assuming a higher profile than his immediate predecessor in the Bush White House, Josh Bolten.

Perhaps no White House chief of staff in modern history has worked the media as aggressively and relentlessly as Emanuel. Drawing on his long-standing relationships with journalists, Emanuel serves up on-the-record quotes, background spin and the sort of capital gossip that lubricates relationships. The former Chicago congressman also seeks their take on events and floats possible administration tactics. And Emanuel is brusquely efficient.<sup>17</sup>

At times, Emanuel’s high profile provoked intense criticism. For example, during the health care reform debate Emanuel suggested that a lack of a public health insurance option in

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Baker, “The Limits of Rahmism,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Shailagh Murray, “Obama’s Chief of Staff Grants Access, Gets Results,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Leibovich, “Obama’s Partisan, Profane Confidant Reigns It In,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Dana Milbank, “At Breakfast with Emanuel, A Side of Sausage-Making,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Perry Bacon, Jr. and Paul Kane, “Senate Democrats Still Seeking GOP Support,” *Washington Post*, July 9, 2009.

the bill was not necessarily a deal breaker. Many liberal groups like Moveon.org and progressives in the House were apoplectic.<sup>18</sup> Conservative members of Congress, however, applauded, particularly Blue Dog Democrats representing swing districts whose constituents were uncomfortable with the legislation's purported hefty price tag.<sup>19</sup>

Emanuel also launched some trial balloons that never got off the ground. The controversy that erupted in April 2009 over the "torture memos," for example, left the COS and White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs on the wrong side of administration policy. In an effort to have the administration take a centrist position by releasing the controversial memos, which provided legal rationales for the Bush administration to authorize enhanced interrogation techniques of prisoners, Emanuel publicly rejected efforts to prosecute the authors of those same memos. The suggestion was condemned by the Democratic base, and the President later moved away from it.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. *Departure*

As chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel performed all of the roles discussed earlier. It is clear, however, that he paid most attention to his involvement as an advisor and as a proxy. He also served as a sturdy guardian of President Obama, despite evident disagreement on policy priorities and strategies.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the most criticism centered around two aspects of Emanuel's tenure: his focus on short term tactics and his weakness as an honest broker. Suskind, for example, contends that Emanuel's "'points on the board' focus never became a managerial strategy," sometimes amplifying policy drift and confusion in and out of the White House.<sup>22</sup> Others noted that Emanuel had difficulties brokering disagreements since he so often was an advocate.<sup>23</sup>

In October 2010, after Chicago Mayor Richard Daley announced he would not seek reelection, Emanuel entered the mayoral race. Senior Advisor Pete Rouse served for just under four months as interim chief of staff. Among other tasks he conducted a review of the White House's policy and management arrangements. That review, especially after the bruising 2010 congressional elections, led the White House to conclude that "legislative strategy was not going to matter as much" and to turn its focus to shoring up relations with a variety of constituencies as it prepared for the 2012 reelection.<sup>24</sup> One of those critical groups was the business community, which was among the reported reasons for turning to Bill Daley as chief of staff.

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<sup>18</sup> Perry Bacon, Jr. and Paul Kane, "Senate Democrats Still Seeking GOP Support," *Washington Post*, July 9, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Steven T. Dennis and Keith Koffler, "Hill Liberals Steamed by Emanuel Remarks," *Roll Call*, July 8, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> R. Jeffrey Smith, "Emanuel Rejects Trial for Memos Author," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2009; Keith Koffler, *Roll Call*, April 27, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Richard Wolffe, *Revival: The Struggle for Survival Inside the Obama White House* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), p. 102.

<sup>22</sup> Ron Suskind, *Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), p. 158.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Richard Wolffe, *Revival: The Struggle for Survival Inside the Obama White House* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), Ron Suskind, *Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011),

<sup>24</sup> Marc Ambinder, "Prime Minister to President," *National Journal*, January 8, 2011, p. 39.



## B. William Daley

### 1. *Another Chicagoan Takes Over*

On January 6, 2011, President Obama announced the appointment of William M. “Bill” Daley to be White House Chief of Staff. Daley, a former Secretary of Commerce during the second Clinton term, was the brother of Richard Daley, the outgoing Mayor of Chicago, the job sought by Obama’s first chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel. In this political game of musical chairs, Interim Chief of Staff Pete Rouse moved back into his familiar counselor/political-fix-it role he had before Emanuel’s departure. At the announcement ceremony held in the White House East Room, President Obama heralded Daley’s business background:

Few Americans can boast the breadth of experience that Bill brings to this job. He served as a member of President Clinton’s Cabinet as Commerce Secretary. He took on several other important duties over the years on behalf of our country. He’s led major corporations. He possesses a deep understanding of how jobs are created and how to grow our economy. And needless to say, Bill also has a smidgen of awareness of how our system of government and politics works. You might say it is a genetic trait.<sup>25</sup>

It is significant that it was not Daley, but Rouse, who received the longest and loudest applause of anyone gathered at the announcement event, including the President. Rouse’s relationship with President Obama, and the respect and admiration he had among the staff, would prove to be an insurmountable challenge for Daley in the turbulent year to come.<sup>26</sup>

The choice of Daley as chief was unconventional for a president replacing a chief of staff. Often, presidents will pick a Washington insider—one with White House experience—to instill order and discipline to a floundering White House operation.<sup>27</sup> Leon Panetta, President Clinton’s second chief, is the model for such a choice. However, in the Obama case, Rahm Emanuel was the ultimate White House and Washington insider. Daley, though he served a term as Commerce Secretary, was a political veteran of Chicago, not the Beltway. He was also a business-friendly pol who could speak the language of Wall Street.

Progressives were mystified by the appointment. For them, Emanuel had left them bitterly disappointed—always seeming to trade away progressive causes in exchange for getting a deal done, regardless of the merits of the policy outcome.<sup>28</sup> With Daley, there would be no misrepresentation—he was not a progressive and his appointment represented an acknowledgment by the Obama administration that it would tack to the center of the ideological

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<sup>25</sup> “Remarks on the Appointment of William M. Daley as White House Chief of Staff,” January 6, 2011. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-appointment-william-m-daley-white-house-chief-staff>, (accessed February 6, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Glenn Thrush, John Bresnahan, and Amie Parnes, “Trouble on Daley’s Watch,” *Politico*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Martha Joynt Kumar, “Musical Chairs with W.H. Staff,” *Politico*, September 30, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Dave Weigel, “So Long, Jerk: Why Liberals Will be Glad to See Rahm Emanuel Go,” *Salon.com*, September 28, 2010.

spectrum. Daley was also on record publicly admonishing the Democratic Party, and indirectly the Obama administration, for veering too far left.<sup>29</sup>

The selection of Daley was also indicative of an attempt to instill more discipline in the White House policy process. As much as Emanuel instilled fear in his colleagues, especially junior ones, there was a sense that the process was messy, disorganized, and lacked discipline. Emanuel, always conscious of the score, had less interest in how points were put on the board (process), or what the points meant (policy outcomes), and more on the final score (political victories).<sup>30</sup> Daley, however, was comfortable in a corporate board room setting where discipline and predictability mattered, and organization charts dictated process. Daley installed a new hierarchy in the White House and attempted to control access more tightly than his predecessor. For a President and team of advisers that were used to having unfettered access and communication, Daley's new hierarchy caused tension. According to one White House insider: "Is there a level of unhappiness with Bill around the White House? Yeah.... You do what you have to do to streamline the organization, cutting meetings from 20 people to five. But a lot of people are pissed."<sup>31</sup>

## 2. *Office of the Chief of Staff under Daley*

As unconventional a pick as Daley was for the chief of staff role, the choice of his deputy chiefs of staff was even less conventional. In fact, Daley had no choice—President Obama selected his deputies before hiring Daley (though they officially started two weeks after him) and it was made clear they were to remain there. Bringing in a chief of staff and not allowing them to install their own trusted aides to top posts is rare.

Both of the original deputy chiefs of staff, Jim Messina and Mona Sutphen, left the White House after the State of the Union Address on January 25. Replacing Messina as deputy chief of staff for operations was Alyssa Mastromonaco who moved over from director of scheduling and advance, a position she held with the Obama campaign. Replacing Sutphen was Nancy-Ann DeParle who was serving as Director of the Office of Health Reform and had been looking forward to leaving the White House to spend more time with her two young boys. Instead, President Obama personally asked her to stay in December 2010. When she agreed, DeParle was under the impression that Interim Chief of Staff Pete Rouse was going to remain in the chief of staff position. According to DeParle: "the way the President presented it to me, the team would be Pete Rouse, me, and Alyssa Mastromonaco."<sup>32</sup> DeParle was later shocked when President Obama called her to tell her that Bill Daley would be coming in as chief instead of Rouse. Upon hearing this, DeParle said: "Well Mr. President, that's fine and Bill Daley, I'm sure, will want to choose his own deputy chief of staff" to which the President responded: "No, no. This is part of the deal...I've told him that I want to keep my senior staff in place and that you and Alyssa are

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<sup>29</sup> William M. Daley, "Keep the Big Tent Big," *Washington Post*, December 23, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Ron Suskind, *Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), p.316-7.

<sup>31</sup> Glenn Thrush, John Bresnahan, and Amie Parnes, "Trouble on Daley's Watch," *Politico*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Nancy-Ann DeParle, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 22, 2021, p.2.

the team.”<sup>33</sup> This point was reiterated later when DeParle told Daley: “I will totally understand if you want your own person” and he retorted “No, the President made clear: you’re the person. He wants you.”<sup>34</sup>

Besides the fact that President Obama personally selected them, DeParle and Mastromonaco were historic choices—it is the first time in history that two female deputy chiefs of staff were serving in a White House simultaneously. In 1996, Evelyn Lieberman became the first female deputy chief of staff in history. It took fifteen years for there to be two female deputy chiefs serving together in the Office of the Chief of Staff.

The division of labor between the deputies in this era was much starker with clearer lines than had been the case under Emanuel, or as DeParle described it, they each had “different swimming lanes.”<sup>35</sup> This was largely a function of the resumes and skill sets each deputy brought to their positions. DeParle was from the policy world had been running point for the White House on healthcare, had built up relationships all over the Hill, and was very familiar with the policy machinery and process in the White House. Mastromonaco was gifted in the operational arts, a skill she honed as the chief scheduler and running advance for the Obama campaign and later the first two years of her White House tenure. DeParle said this of her colleague: “I used to describe Alyssa this way: if the President needs to go the moon and he calls Alyssa, she would say, “Sir, do you want the morning or afternoon flight?”<sup>36</sup>

### 3. *A Year of Turmoil*

The year that Bill Daley spent as White House chief of staff was certainly eventful and challenging. With the GOP takeover of the House, President Obama would no longer be able to control the agenda or play much offense. Instead, the White House would need to be reactive, attempt to find areas of common ground with Republicans, and pick battles that could be won or were at least worth fighting for. From the budget to raising the debt-ceiling to renewal of the payroll tax holiday, confrontation between the White House and Congressional GOP was the norm.

Negotiations over raising the debt ceiling proved to be a difficult task for the Obama White House. What typically had been a routine matter became a game of chicken in the summer of 2011 that damaged the standing of both Congress and the President.<sup>37</sup> Daley became the chief of staff position for precisely this type of assignment—working with Republicans to forge a bipartisan agreement in a manner satisfactory to all seemed an attainable task. For a while, it

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<sup>33</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Nancy-Ann DeParle, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 22, 2021, p.2-3.

<sup>34</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Nancy-Ann DeParle, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 22, 2021, p.3.

<sup>35</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Nancy-Ann DeParle, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 22, 2021, p.7.

<sup>36</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Nancy-Ann DeParle, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 22, 2021, p.7.

<sup>37</sup> D. Andrew Austin, “The Debt Limit: History and Recent Increases,” *Congressional Research Service*, November 2, 2015. Available on World Wide Web: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL31967.pdf> (accessed February 10, 2023).

looked like President Obama and Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH), with Daley's help and encouragement, would be able to strike a "grand bargain" on raising the debt ceiling that would have included \$4 trillion in long-term debt reduction. Instead, observers and the public panned the ultimate result: a supercommittee process abdicating both executive and legislative authority in favor of automatic budget cuts to raise the ceiling and reduce long-term debt.<sup>38</sup> The messy political process also resulted in the U.S. bond rating being lowered for the first time in history, from AAA to AA-.<sup>39</sup> The unraveling of the debt ceiling negotiations was a blow to the President's prestige, and much of the blame targeted Daley, who had "counseled Obama to go all-in on a grand bargain with the speaker despite signs of tea party revolt in Boehner's caucus."<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Daley's Demotion, Downfall, and Departure

Daley ruffled feathers in the White House and on Capitol Hill by cutting off access to himself and seemingly to the President.<sup>41</sup> Although Emanuel could be intimidating and volatile, he was always accessible, and his door was generally open not only to staff, but also to members of Congress and to anyone who had his cell phone number. In contrast, under Daley, the door was frequently shut, and the chief of staff often was not there.<sup>42</sup>

The flashpoint of the staff discontent seems petty enough: soon after taking over, Daley decided to eliminate the big 8:30 a.m. daily meeting Emanuel convened after the 7:30 a.m. senior staff meeting. Under Daley, it has been cut to a Friday meeting in which questions to Daley were carefully screened.<sup>43</sup>

The new chief of staff eventually reinitiated the 8:30 daily meeting, but staff discontent continued.<sup>44</sup> *Politico* reported that constriction of access to Obama was at the President's directive.

The irony, of course, is that Daley is doing what his boss wants. He takes his role of gatekeeper seriously, and has restricted the torrent of paper and people into the Oval Office. The decision to downsize and deprioritize Obama's legislative affairs team was made before Daley ever entered the building on a blueprint from interim chief of staff Pete Rouse.... "Sometimes people take out their frustrations on POTUS," said a senior

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<sup>38</sup> According to Gallup poll conducted on August 2, 2011, 46% of Americans opposed the debt-ceiling agreement and 41% approved how President Obama handled the negotiations. This was actually significantly higher than the 29% who approved of Speaker John Boehner's and 27% who approved of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's handling of the negotiations. See "Tea Party Supporters Oppose Debt Agreement, 68% to 22%," Gallup.com, August 4, 2011. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/148841/Tea-Party-Supporters-Oppose-Debt-Agreement.aspx> (accessed February 10, 2023).

<sup>39</sup> Jim Puzanghera, "S&P Downgrades U.S. Credit Rating," *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 2011. Cf. Paul Starobin, "The Rise and Fall of Bill Daley: An Inside Account," *The New Republic*, January 18, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Glenn Thrush and Carrie Budoff Brown, "Why Daley Had to Go," *Politico*, January 9, 2012. "Daley was philosophical about it....Daley saw it as his role to take the fall and joked ruefully and often about his sacrifice."

<sup>41</sup> Glenn Thrush, John Bresnahan, and Amie Parnes, "Trouble on Daley's Watch," *Politico*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Glenn Thrush, John Bresnahan, and Amie Parnes, "Trouble on Daley's Watch," *Politico*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Glenn Thrush, John Bresnahan, and Amie Parnes, "Trouble on Daley's Watch," *Politico*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Glenn Thrush and Carrie Budoff Brown, "Why Daley Had to Go," *Politico*, January 9, 2012.

administration official. “Sometimes — hopefully — they take it out on the chief of staff instead. He’s always going to be the top target.”<sup>45</sup>

All White House staff, especially senior aides, work extreme hours. Yet, Daley was criticized for not always being available. Unlike his predecessor who kept his BlackBerry practically glued to his cheek, Daley often could not be reached. One former colleague complained: “He goes dark—you need an answer, and by the time he gets back to you, it’s too late. And that’s not good for the manager of a bunch of burning pots.”<sup>46</sup>

Over the course of 2011, the Chief of Staff increasingly alienated Democratic congressional leaders. His relationship with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) was especially rocky—particularly after the debt-ceiling negotiations broke down in the summer and after Daley and the White House demonstrated that it was quick to cut side-deals without conferring with Reid.<sup>47</sup> One senior Democratic aide opined, Daley “has no understanding of the [congressional] process, and he doesn’t want to understand the process. The entire Senate Democratic Caucus has a problem with Daley.”<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps more than any other single event, Daley’s fall from grace followed an unprovoked, self-inflicted wound. On October 28, 2011, the Chief of Staff’s interview with to Roger Simon of *Politico* undermined Daley’s credibility in Washington and made his eventual departure inevitable. The article, “Bill Daley, Unplugged,” Daley offended both congressional Republicans and Democrats, referred to the first three years of the Obama administration as “brutal,” telegraphed the Administration’s plans to skirt Congress by using unilateral executive powers, and both criticized his predecessor and channeled him by periodic cursing. In the article, Simon and Daley discussed presidential access and Daley’s being at the nexus of politics and policy:

Daley has near-total access to Obama. “There’s no meeting that he’s having that I can’t walk into,” Daley says. “But you’ve got to make the judgment whether it’s appropriate to walk in.” He was in every briefing the president had on the Osama bin Laden raid and gives advice to the president on both policy and politics. And you can keep policy and politics separate? I ask. “They can be separate, yeah,” Daley says. “You can say, ‘Look, this may be good policy, but the politics of it may be sh—.’” And which will the president go for? “He’ll try to find that middle ground,” Daley says in a bemused tone. “How close can we get to it being really sh—— policy or really sh—— politics but getting something accomplished?”<sup>49</sup>

Eleven days following the *Politico* interview, Daley was demoted. In an unprecedented move in White House history, a sitting chief of staff had power and authority stripped away and given to another staffer. In Daley’s case, the aide was none other than Pete Rouse, the interim chief whom he had replaced.

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<sup>45</sup> Glenn Thrush, John Bresnahan, and Amie Parnes, “Trouble on Daley’s Watch,” *Politico*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Eleanor Clift and Patricia Murphy, “Behind Bill Daley’s Demotion,” *The Daily Beast*, November 9, 2011

<sup>47</sup> Glenn Thrush, John Bresnahan, and Amie Parnes, “Trouble on Daley’s Watch,” *Politico*, September 15, 2011

<sup>48</sup> Glenn Thrush, John Bresnahan, and Amie Parnes, “Trouble on Daley’s Watch,” *Politico*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Roger Simon, “Bill Daley, Unplugged,” *Politico*, October 28, 2011.

At a press gaggle that day, Press Secretary Jay Carney was asked about the reconfiguration of duties among the senior staff:

Chief of Staff Bill Daley has asked, as part of his efforts to make the White House run as efficiently as possible, has asked Pete Rouse, counselor to the President, to help streamline and make more efficient and effective internal communications in the White House and to help with some of the day-to-day management of the place. Bill Daley, as the Chief of Staff, retains obviously all of his authority and ultimate responsibility for the White House operations and White House staff...It's less about transferring duties than it is about adding responsibilities without subtracting any from anybody else.<sup>50</sup>

Carney's comments notwithstanding, the power and authority of the chief of staff had been curbed. No chief has ever given up authority voluntarily; involuntary surrendering of authority has come through firing or forced resignation. Daley became more an observer of the White House process than a participant, "a walking corpse" who was chief of staff in name only."<sup>51</sup>

Not surprisingly, two months later, Daley announced his intention to resign at the end of January 2012. As chief of staff, Daley had brought needed discipline and reorientation to a White House that no longer had a working legislative majority. Yet he never fully adjusted to the demands for a chief who could balance responsibilities for guarding access to the President while channeling the concerns of staff and outsiders. Nor did Daley appear to fully appreciate the depth of the partisan polarization and hostility in Washington or the changes that had taken place since his time in the Clinton administration. Moreover, as the Obama presidency continued to position itself for the reelection campaign, the Chief of Staff's initial charge to solidify ties with business and work with congressional Republicans was neither necessary nor desired.<sup>52</sup>

### C. Jacob "Jack" Lew

#### *1. From Business Community Outsider to Pragmatic Liberal Insider*

Bill Daley was replaced by Jacob "Jack" Lew, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget. A veteran of Capitol Hill where he served as an adviser to Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill (D-MA), Lew had occupied in a number of positions in the Clinton White House including as OMB Director from 1998-2001, before reprising the role under Obama beginning in 2010. On January 9, 2012, President Obama announced the move:

I'm pleased to announce that Jack Lew has agreed to serve as my next Chief of Staff. Let me begin, first of all, by thanking Ruth [Lew] for allowing Jack to serve in what I know is one of the most difficult jobs in Washington. But Jack has had one of the other most difficult jobs in Washington. For more than a year, Jack has served as the Director of the

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Starobin, "The Rise and Fall of Bill Daley: An Inside Account," *The New Republic*, January 18, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Starobin, "The Rise and Fall of Bill Daley: An Inside Account," *The New Republic*, January 18, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> A commentator in *Politico* noted that Daley was "so 2010" as the White House strategy shifted from conciliation to confrontation.

Office of Management and Budget. As anyone who's been following the news lately can tell you, this is not an easy job.<sup>53</sup>

In an acknowledgement of the chief of staff's growing national security policy role,<sup>54</sup> President Obama acknowledged some of the foreign policy credentials Lew brought to the job:

Jack also has my confidence on matters outside the borders. Before he served at OMB for me, Jack spent two years running the extremely complex and challenging budget and operations process for Secretary Clinton at the State Department, where his portfolio also included managing the civilian operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. And over the last year, he has weighed in on many of the major foreign policy decisions that we've made.<sup>55</sup>

Lew's selection as chief of staff was cheered by many observers who viewed him as an effective manager and "savvy and cool technocrat" who contrasted sharply in personality with both of his predecessors.<sup>56</sup> Lew brought management skill, a network of allies, and respect to the position having worked decades in public service at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue and his involvement in numerous policy spheres.<sup>57</sup>

## 2. Office of the Chief of Staff under Lew

Lew's experience in the Obama White House helped smooth the transition from Daley, who never was able to shed the outsider label. Lew knew the important players, including the two existing deputy chiefs of staff Aylssa Mastromonaco and Nancy-Ann DeParle, who remained in place throughout his tenure. In not seeking major changes in the White House, Lew explained:

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<sup>53</sup> "Remarks on the Resignation of White House Chief of Staff William M. Daley and the Appointment of Jacob J. 'Jack' Lew as White House Chief of Staff," January 9, 2012. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-resignation-white-house-chief-staff-william-m-daley-and-the-appointment-jacob>, (accessed February 6, 2023).

<sup>54</sup> For more on the chief of staff's role in national security policy, see David B. Cohen, Chris J. Dolan, and Jerel A. Rosati, "A Place at the Table: The Emerging Foreign Policy Roles of the White House Chief of Staff." *Congress and the Presidency*, Autumn 2002, Vol.29, #2, Pp.119-49.

<sup>55</sup> "Remarks on the Resignation of White House Chief of Staff William M. Daley and the Appointment of Jacob J. 'Jack' Lew as White House Chief of Staff," January 9, 2012. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-resignation-white-house-chief-staff-william-m-daley-and-the-appointment-jacob>, (accessed February 6, 2023).

<sup>56</sup> Jim Kuhnenn, "Lew, New White House Chief of Staff, a Low-Key, Long-Time Policy Insider," *Associated Press*, January 9, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> President Obama acknowledged Lew's experience with the budget and as a trusted high-level advisor, as part of the reason for his selection: "Jack's economic advice has been invaluable, and he has my complete trust, both because of his mastery of the numbers, but because of the values behind those numbers." "Remarks on the Resignation of White House Chief of Staff William M. Daley and the Appointment of Jacob J. 'Jack' Lew as White House Chief of Staff," January 9, 2012. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-resignation-white-house-chief-staff-william-m-daley-and-the-appointment-jacob>, (accessed February 6, 2023).

Because I had come into the White House from OMB, which is part of the Executive Office of the President, but not technically White House Office, I wasn't a stranger to any of the people or any of the organization, and I tend to have a personal preference for gradual change rather than instant turn-everything-over to put your mark on it. I knew who was doing what. I knew who I had confidence in, and I could bring people in as I needed to supplement what wasn't there already....Conversely, the White House staff knew me very well. I had been one of them, sitting in the staff meetings in the morning, working through the long-term planning, the crises, and I think it made for a very easy transition...<sup>58</sup>

One change Lew did make was to the structure of the Office of the Chief of Staff by adding a third deputy chief, for the first time since the second term of the George W. Bush administration. Mark Childress, named deputy chief of staff for planning, was a veteran of both the Clinton and Obama administrations and held a number of congressional positions including working for Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) on the on the Senate's Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and for Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD), where he worked with Denis McDonough, his future boss. Childress, as his title suggests, was named to help address the particularly big or vexing problems that threatened to derail the White House agenda and the President's reelection such as the rollout of the ACA to designing executive actions to pursue many of the tenets of the failed DREAM Act. A journalist described Childress as a "wonky policy tweaker who doesn't go on camera" and solves "complex problems like figuring out how to use the interagency process to push legislative goals past a reticent congress" and does so quietly behind-the-scenes.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, colleagues described Childress as "exactly the kind of operative Obama likes: devoid of drama and skilled in the art of getting people on various sides of an issue to yes."<sup>60</sup>

### *3. A Different Chief of Staff for a Different Season*

Lew's familiarity with the policy process allowed him to easily navigate and oversee the various White House policy processes. Although Daley had not been a "policy wonk," Lew was. Lew recalled: "Being somebody who was known as deeply engaged in the White House policy process I think gave me an ability to do that in a way that didn't ruffle feathers."<sup>61</sup>

The new chief's policy grounding was instrumental in President Obama tasking him with one of the most consequential decisions of his presidency. Following the failure of the DREAM Act, the President assigned Lew and White House Counsel Kathy Ruemmler to oversee the creation of new rules that would allow undocumented individuals who were brought to the

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<sup>58</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Jacob J. Lew, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 19, 2021, pp.1-2.

<sup>59</sup> Evan McMorris-Santoro, "Meet the Most Powerful Man in the White House That You've Never Heard of," *BuzzFeed News*, May 30, 2013. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/evanmcsan/meet-the-most-powerful-man-in-the-white-house-youve-never-he> (accessed February 13, 2023).

<sup>60</sup> Evan McMorris-Santoro, "Meet the Most Powerful Man in the White House That You've Never Heard of," *BuzzFeed News*, May 30, 2013. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/evanmcsan/meet-the-most-powerful-man-in-the-white-house-youve-never-he> (accessed February 13, 2023).

<sup>61</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Jacob J. Lew, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 19, 2021, p.3.



United States as children to stay in the country.<sup>62</sup> On June 15, 2012, Obama announced a deferment from deportation actions for Dreamers as well as eligibility for work permits. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) became one of the Obama administration's signature policies, and its launching during an election year was particularly bold.

The campaign year of 2012 meant that the President and White House would, by necessity, function in a different way. President Obama would be spending many days and nights away from the White House on the campaign trail. One of the reasons Lew was picked is because he was an experienced White House aide who had served in two different administrations, and he had the trust of the President to manage the White House in his stead. According to Lew, President Obama "explained why, for the year we were going into, I was the person he trusted and wanted in that role. He said to be his alter ego while he was away more than normal because it was an election year."<sup>63</sup>

During his year as chief of staff, Lew traveled little with the President, leaving that task to one or both of his deputies, depending upon the agenda. When Obama was out of town, he and Lew kept in close contact and spoke at the beginning and end of each day. As the year wore on and the election neared, Lew traveled more with POTUS, keeping him up-to-date on issues that needed presidential attention as well as helping with debate preparation in the early fall.<sup>64</sup>

Since Obama traveled so frequently, Lew spent considerable time as a proxy connecting with the cabinet and other executive branch officials, Congress, and the media. Lew was skilled in media relations and a capable administration spokesperson on television, particularly on the Sunday morning news shows. This was a notable upgrade from Daley who sometimes struggled under the klieg lights. Throughout the year, Lew appeared on a variety of shows, including those on the conservative *Fox News* network, to give the White House perspective on issues ranging from the ACA to budget negotiations and the "fiscal cliff" to leaks occurring in the intelligence community.

Certainly, there were missteps, such as when Lew failed to wake President Obama in the middle of the night after receiving word of a deadly mass shooting at an Aurora, Colorado movie theater. As Lew recounts, the President told him: "There may have been nothing that I could do at that moment, but when something like this happens to the United States, people have a right to know that the President knows in real time and it's affecting him the way it's affecting the people who are there."<sup>65</sup>

Overall, however, Lew's year as chief of staff was a successful one, especially if his success is measured by Barack Obama's successful reelection. Lew's tenure was marked by a

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<sup>62</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Jacob J. Lew, Chief of Staff Project, October 19, 2021, p.5.

<sup>63</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Jacob J. Lew, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 19, 2021, p.1.

<sup>64</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Jacob J. Lew, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 19, 2021, p.4.

<sup>65</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Jacob J. Lew, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 19, 2021, p.10.

conspicuous lack of internal crises, drama, and scandals. Clearly, his vast experience on the Hill and as OMB Director for two presidents was a great asset.

Had President Obama not nominated Lew to become Secretary of the Treasury in January 2013, it seems likely he would have resigned his White House post, retired from public service, and returned to the Bronx.<sup>66</sup> Instead, he became the nation's 76<sup>th</sup> Treasury Secretary and served in that post the entire second term.

## **D. Denis McDonough**

### *1. The Strong Safety Takes Over*

Replacing Jack Lew was Denis McDonough, a longtime Obama aide who served as chief foreign policy advisor in Obama's Senate office and as a foreign policy advisor on the 2008 presidential campaign. McDonough then assumed leadership positions on the National Security Council staff. In October 2010 he was named deputy national security assistant, where he remained until becoming chief of staff.

McDonough had a reputation as hard-nosed and the hardest working person in the room:

He is a lanky and fastidious man with deeply shaded eyes, a former NCAA Division III strong safety who put himself in the hospital during the 2008 presidential campaign after reacting to a sleeping pill following too many days without sleep...For most of the past four years, he has lived in the White House basement, choreographing Situation Room strategy sessions on endless foreign crises. He had a standing bet with CIA Director John Brennan, then the White House counterterrorism chief and a fellow basement dweller. One night a week, they would each vow to get home to their families before 7 p.m. As often as not, they both lost. Come Christmastime in 2011, Obama had to directly order McDonough in front of other staff members to take time off.<sup>67</sup>

President Obama joked about McDonough's upbringing and resilience in remarks announcing his appointment: "Denis can be tough. It probably comes from being one of eleven children: You've got to be tough...Maybe it comes from his college football days...I always tease Denis that he made up for modest talents with extraordinary dedication and a high threshold for pain."<sup>68</sup>

### *2. Office of the Chief of Staff under McDonough*

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<sup>66</sup> David A. Graham, "Who is Jack Lew, Obama's Nominee for Treasury Secretary?" *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/who-is-jack-lew-obamas-nominee-for-treasury-secretary/266982/> (accessed February 10, 2023).

<sup>67</sup> Michael Scherer, "Strong Safety," *Time Magazine*, May 20, 2013.

<sup>68</sup> "Remarks on the Appointment of Denis R. McDonough as White House Chief of Staff," January 25, 2013. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-appointment-denis-r-mcdonough-white-house-chief-staff>, (accessed February 11, 2023).

The Office of the Chief of Staff underwent significant turnover and McDonough was given the authority to make significant changes. According to McDonough, “[President Obama] gave me leeway to build the team I wanted to build, and I think he also wanted to use it as a time when he could make changes that he wanted under the cover of the change of the chief.”<sup>69</sup>

Notable changes occurred at the deputy level during McDonough’s tenure, particularly with the “policy” position. Nancy-Ann DeParle, deputy chief of staff for policy, was finally able to leave her White House job—something she had intended to do in early 2011. She was replaced by Rob Nabors who had served previously under Jack Lew in Clinton’s OMB, and then as minority staff director on the House Appropriations Committee. In the Obama administration, Nabors served as deputy director of OMB and then head of the Office of Legislative Affairs before being tapped as deputy chief of staff for policy. Nabors made a hasty exit when he was exiled in May of 2014 to the Department of Veterans Affairs to oversee investigation of a whistleblower account of potential political pressure of the VA Office of Inspector General to downplay a report on long wait times and the subsequent deaths of 40 veterans at the Phoenix VA medical center. Emails later released by the House Veterans Affairs committee indicated Nabors, himself, and the acting VA Secretary pressured the Inspector General.<sup>70</sup> Nabors appointment was only supposed to be temporary, but he never returned to his duties as deputy chief of staff.

Nabors was replaced by Kristie Canegallo who would be appointed as deputy chief of staff for implementation, the first time this title would be used in the White House. Canegallo had worked on the NSC staff with McDonough and later served as an advisor to Chief of Staff McDonough on healthcare issues. The “implementation” was added to the title to indicate that Canegallo would be focused on policy implementation, particularly with regards to the Affordable Care Act and other healthcare related items, national security issues such as the Afghanistan War, information and privacy issues, and immigration.<sup>71</sup> Denis McDonough described why Canegallo’s title was altered from “policy” to “implementation”:

She filled the policy slot, but this was after she became deputy after healthcare.gov. And for two reasons we changed the title to implementation. One is that we recognized that—and I think this is a weakness of Democrats generally but also of White Houses generally (Democratic White Houses, in particular, but also White Houses generally)—which is they focus a lot on the policy making, they focus insufficiently on the policy execution. There’s an argument that says that flows to the cabinet and that’s true, but on big multiagency implementation challenges, like healthcare.gov for example, I think it’s reasonable to expect a robust White House focus on execution and implementation. So that was one reason to change it. The other reason was to make sure that the policy agencies, the policy components, DPC, NSC, and EC, and OMB, understood that the

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<sup>69</sup> David B. Cohen, Interview with Denis R. McDonough, Chief of Staff Project, December 21, 2017, p.2.

<sup>70</sup> Dennis Wagner, “E-mails: VA Secretary Sought Changes in Phoenix Report” *USA Today*, October 31, 2014. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/10/31/e-mails-va-secretary-sought-changes-in-phoenix-report/18271257/> (accessed February 13, 2023).

<sup>71</sup> Jennifer Epstein, “Obama Puts ACA Adviser in Key Role,” *Politico*, May 16, 2014. <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/05/obama-aca-health-care-kristie-canegallo-deputy-chief-of-staff-106770> (accessed February 13, 2023).

policy is theirs. They needed to own it. They weren't going to get layered. And so that's why we changed the title.<sup>72</sup>

Canegallo would stay in the position until the end of the Obama presidency.

Alyssa Mastromonaco remained in her position as deputy chief of staff for operations until, as she described it, she was understandably "exhausted" and needed to leave the administration and the grueling schedule behind.<sup>73</sup> Replacing her was Anita Decker Breckenridge who had worked Barack Obama when he was a member of the Illinois Senate and later as a U.S. Senator. Later on in the Obama administration, she was chief of staff at the National Endowment of the Arts before becoming President Obama's personal secretary in 2011. Breckenridge would serve the remainder of the Obama presidency.

Mark Childress remained on under McDonough to help implement the Affordable Care Act and help put out various fires such as with the IRS scandal and the failed launch of the Healthcare.gov website. Childress was appointed as U.S. Ambassador to Tanzania in May of 2014. Denis McDonough explained why after Childress left he did not replace him and instead returned to the two deputy chiefs of staff model: "In Anita and Kristie we ended up having two deputies who really had the confidence of their teammates. The risk is, you add another deputy you end up layering the other assistants to the president in a way and I thought that both wasn't necessary, but also was counterproductive."<sup>74</sup>

### *3. The President's Four-Year Walking Partner*

Having spent his entire career as a professional staffer, Denis McDonough was the quintessential chief of staff who embodied the "staff" rather than the "chief" part of the title. There is no doubt that McDonough's loyalty to his boss, and over-achieving work ethic—traits supremely valued in a West Wing staffer—were highly valued by President Obama and his colleagues.<sup>75</sup> He was not flashy, was not drawn to the klieg lights, and did not hang around the White House press corps dishing out juicy quotes on background. In fact, McDonough look down on the frequent Beltway habit of high-level officials giving anonymous quoted to journalists: "I refused to talk to reporters on background. I think that's the dumbest tradition in Washington. I think it's a chicken shit tradition and my position is, if I'm going to talk to a reporter, I'm going to talk to a reporter on the record."<sup>76</sup>

McDonough viewed himself as a throwback of sorts to chiefs of staff who operated in the shadows, focusing on running the White House and overseeing the policy process. McDonough described his conversation with President Obama before taking the job:

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<sup>72</sup> David B. Cohen, Interview with Denis R. McDonough, Chief of Staff Project, December 21, 2017, p.4.

<sup>73</sup> Alyssa Mastromonaco, *Who Thought This Was a Good Idea? And Other Questions You Should Have Answers to When You Work in the White House* (Twelve, New York, 2017), p.188.

<sup>74</sup> David B. Cohen, Interview with Denis R. McDonough, Chief of Staff Project, December 21, 2017, p.3.

<sup>75</sup> Peter Baker, "Obama Reaches Out, But Not Very Far, To Build New Team," *New York Times*, January 26, 2013.

<sup>76</sup> David B. Cohen, Interview with Denis R. McDonough, Chief of Staff Project, December 21, 2017, p.2.

I told President Obama that if what he was looking for in the job was somebody like Rahm or Jack who was a policy advisor, that he should go with somebody else, that that would not be my strength. I said my strength...is that I could assure him that I would run a straightforward process from the Chief of Staff's Office, that I would not be the guy who'd give him an idea, but I would be the person who'd help make sure that the ideas that did get generated fairly, transparently, and in a way that everybody had to chop at them and then work to ensure that those good ideas arrived at transparently were then effectively implemented.<sup>77</sup>

To a significant extent, this may reflect an appropriate adaptation to the point in the presidency at which McDonough was chief of staff. Jack Lew, for instance, described a White House environment in which high-level staffers like chiefs of staff who serve at the end of a presidency are often effective, experienced, and "battle-tested," if lesser known:

Very few presidents would come in and hire people right out of extensive Hill and staff experience, agency staff experience, to be in the...marquee positions. It's considered a sign of getting off to a powerful start to have people who've been in Congress or governors or people whose names are already known outside of the DC area. I think by the time you're in your 8th year you want to get everything done you can get done and you want the blocking and tackling to work well and efficiently, and you want to make no mistakes. You don't want to go out with any kind of a mess you have to clean up and I think, in general, there's a tendency towards that kind of pattern. If you look at the Obama team at the end,...Denis has been the trusted staff guy and he became chief of staff for four years....[A]n awful lot of the team had a lot of battlefield experience.<sup>78</sup>

McDonough had a full plate of issues to grapple with when he became chief of staff, ranging from implementation of the ACA the impending launch of the Healthcare.gov website to a host of foreign policy crises in the Middle East. If the Obama administration was going to achieve anything legislatively, improving relations with Congress, particularly with Republicans, would need to be a priority. McDonough spent much of his first year personally trying to mend fences with congressional Republicans, and set out on a charm offensive, wining and dining GOP leadership and even rank-and-file congressional members, albeit with mixed results:

For an administration that has had a hard time creating and maintaining relationships on Capitol Hill, President Obama's new chief of staff, Denis McDonough, has emerged as a bridge builder early in the administration's second term. As Obama has undertaken a well-publicized outreach offensive, McDonough has kept a busy social calendar himself, quietly meeting with influential Republicans in the House and Senate. This week, he had dinner with House Majority Leader Eric Cantor. He huddled on Capitol Hill with a dozen Senate Republicans shortly before the recent congressional recess. And last month, he

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<sup>77</sup> David B. Cohen, Interview with Denis R. McDonough, Chief of Staff Project, December 21, 2017, p.1.

<sup>78</sup> David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, Interview with Jacob J. Lew, *The Chief of Staff Project*, October 19, 2021, pp.8-9.

met with House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, the former GOP presidential candidate.<sup>79</sup>

These efforts at catering to the GOP, however, led to some bruised egos and feelings among Congressional Democrats and progressives who felt ignored by the Obama White House, or worse, given bad news or told no by the Chief of Staff. In one very public episode, McDonough had to play the bad cop, pressuring Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, to redact part of the CIA interrogations report that her committee was set to publish.

Over the Columbus Day weekend, the White House chief of staff, Denis R. McDonough, traveled to the San Francisco home of Senator Dianne Feinstein, the chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, to negotiate personally over redactions in a Senate report on the C.I.A.'s detention and interrogation policies after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. That Mr. McDonough would get involved in such an arcane matter puzzles some legislative aides on Capitol Hill, given the other demands on his time.<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately, however, it is unclear that McDonough's efforts at restoring civility between the Obama White House and congressional Republicans actually paid off in terms of policy.

One of McDonough's biggest challenges as chief of staff was the disastrous launch of the Healthcare.gov website on October 1, just nine months into his tenure. McDonough had been assured by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the federal agency responsible for creating Healthcare.gov, that the rollout would go smoothly. When it collapsed under the strain of millions of people trying to sign up for insurance on the new healthcare exchange, the buck stopped with the President—and by proxy the Chief of Staff. McDonough took over as White House point-person to determine if the website could be salvaged, and if it could, to address the problems as quickly as possible.<sup>81</sup> He quickly assembled a technological rapid response team, which spent several weeks on the site.<sup>82</sup> By spring 2014, the website was functioning as expected, and thousands signed up daily for health insurance. Although the website crash eventually cost Kathleen Sebelius her job as HHS Secretary, few called for firing McDonough, a testament to the respect, credibility, and loyalty McDonough had built up.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, in a number of foreign policy areas, McDonough played a large role perhaps owing to his long career as a foreign policy advisor and his years served with the NSC staff. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel was incensed after revelations that the United States was spying its close ally Germany and that her cellphone had been tapped by the National Security Agency, it was McDonough that was dispatched to meet with German officials, a rarity for a chief of staff to be sent on such a high-profile and sensitive diplomatic mission. The fact

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<sup>79</sup> Shane Goldmacher, "The Quiet Charm Offensive of Obama Chief of Staff Denis McDonough," *National Journal*, May 10, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> Mark Landler, "Obama Could Replace Aides Bruised by a Cascade of Crises," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Steven Brill, "Code Red," *Time Magazine*, March 10, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> On the team was Jeff Zients, a future White House chief of staff for President Joe Biden.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Baker, "Hard Charger at Obama's Side Has Hands Full," *New York Times*, November 28, 2013.

that McDonough and not the Secretary of State was sent was emblematic of the trust POTUS had in his chief and a signal that the mission was endorsed by President Obama himself.<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps no situation demonstrates the influence that McDonough had as chief than the Syrian Civil War. The use of chemical weapons on civilians by the Syrian government brought immense pressure to bear on President Obama from Congress to engage in a quick retaliatory military strike against Syrian government assets. Though McDonough strove to be a neutral broker, ensuring that his boss heard all points of view on major decisions, it was often McDonough's counsel that President Obama wanted to hear. McDonough and his boss would take afternoon walks around the South Lawn to discussing the most pressing matters of the day and it was during one of these sessions that President Obama decided not to unilaterally strike Syria and go to Congress for authorization. Peter Baker of the *New York Times* wrote about McDonough's influence:

Mr. McDonough brings an advantage his predecessors did not have, an unrivaled relationship with the president born out of years of collaboration and now frequent walks together on the South Lawn. When big decisions are made, it is often only Mr. McDonough at Mr. Obama's side, as when just the two of them returned from a 45-minute stroll in August to announce to stunned aides that Mr. Obama would suspend plans to strike Syria in response to a chemical weapons attack and ask Congress for permission instead.<sup>85</sup>

McDonough was hired as chief of staff five days after Barack Obama's second inauguration, and he lasted the rest of the term. Sylvia Mathews Burwell, who served as HHS Secretary in the second Obama term and had also served as deputy chief of staff in the second term of the Clinton White House, observed that "Denis ran a very good shop and Denis did it for four years, which, boy, that's a hard, impossible job. Denis understood the importance of team...[and] had the President's complete trust."<sup>86</sup> McDonough's tenure is the longest of any Democratic chief in history, and he was the fourth longest serving chief dating back to Sherman Adams under President Dwight Eisenhower. For President Obama, Denis McDonough was the right person at the right time to serve in that role.

### III. CONCLUSION

The position of chief of staff in the White House is often described not only as "javelin catching," but also as a "killer" job in which incumbents suffer burnout, often after a year or two. That being the case, the president must play a role something like that of the manager of a sports team, trying to match players to positions and situations in order to give each the best chance to succeed individually and thus meet the team's needs. Barack Obama, an avid basketball fan, proved adept at this form of personnel management.

Managing White House chiefs of staff is in part a matter of finding compatible people, whose values and personalities mesh well with the president's. But it is more than that. It

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<sup>84</sup> Peter Baker and Melissa Eddy, "Obama Sends Aide to Soothe German Allies," *New York Times*, July 23, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Baker, "Hard Charger at Obama's Side Has Hands Full," *New York Times*, November 28, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> David B. Cohen, Interview with Sylvia Mathews Burwell, Chief of Staff Project, March 7, 2019, p.15.

involves determining what roles need to be emphasized at which times, given the political and policy environments facing the administration. Any chief will play multiple roles, but the secret lies in matching personal strengths to current needs. Thus, President Obama tapped Rahm Emanuel when he needed a proxy who knew the Congress and had a relentless drive to make his campaign promises real. Later, when bringing more order to the White House seemed necessary, the President found—or at least thought he found—a manager in Bill Daley. As the presidential life cycle churned and a tough reelection campaign loomed, President Obama turned to an experienced policy wonk and manager who could effectively play the advisor role and run the White House while the President was on the campaign trail: Jack Lew. Finally, as foreign and defense policy took center stage in the second term, Denis McDonough brought a desired mix of policy expertise and personal chemistry with POTUS.

Like presidents, chiefs can usually name, or influence the naming, of their deputies. Part of the success of the Obama White House, however, lay in the continuity provided by long-serving deputies. Although nobody is expected to serve all eight years in such a job, Obama's White House was notable for the lack of conflict, controversy, and turnovers when compared to other administrations, most notably its immediate successor. In all, the White House staff under President Obama generally reflected his nickname, "no drama Obama." Not everything or everyone worked out perfectly. In presidential politics, little goes strictly according to plan. Looking back, though, it is easy to appreciate the success of the Obama White House and the Office of the Chief of Staff.



**TABLE 1**  
**WHITE HOUSE CHIEFS OF STAFF, NIXON-BIDEN**

<b><u>Chief of Staff</u></b>	<b><u>Tenure</u></b>	<b><u>President</u></b>	<b><u>Party</u></b>
Harry Robbins (H.R.) Haldeman	1969-73	Nixon	Republican
Alexander M. Haig, Jr.	1973-74	Nixon	Republican
Donald H. Rumsfeld	1974-75	Ford	Republican
Richard M. Cheney	1975-77	Ford	Republican
William Hamilton M. Jordan	1979-80	Carter	Democratic
Jack H. Watson, Jr.	1980-81	Carter	Democratic
James A. Baker III	1981-85	Reagan	Republican
Donald T. Regan	1985-87	Reagan	Republican
Howard H. Baker, Jr.	1987-88	Reagan	Republican
Kenneth M. Duberstein	1988-89	Reagan	Republican
John H. Sununu	1989-91	G.H.W. Bush	Republican
Samuel K. Skinner	1991-92	G.H.W. Bush	Republican
James A. Baker III	1992-93	G.H.W. Bush	Republican
Thomas F. McLarty III	1993-94	Clinton	Democratic
Leon E. Panetta	1994-97	Clinton	Democratic
Erskine B. Bowles	1997-98	Clinton	Democratic
John D. Podesta	1998-01	Clinton	Democratic
Andrew H. Card, Jr.	2001-06	G.W. Bush	Republican
Joshua B. Bolten	2006-09	G.W. Bush	Republican
Rahm I. Emanuel <sup>87</sup>	2009-10	Obama	Democratic
William M. Daley	2011-12	Obama	Democratic
Jacob J. Lew	2012-13	Obama	Democratic
Denis R. McDonough	2013-17	Obama	Democratic
Reinhold R. “Reince” Priebus	2017	Trump	Republican
John F. Kelly	2017-19	Trump	Republican
John “Mick” Mulvaney <sup>88</sup>	2019-20	Trump	Republican
Mark R. Meadows	2020-21	Trump	Republican
Ronald A. Klain	2021-23	Biden	Democratic
Jeffrey D. Zients	2023-p	Biden	Democratic

*Source: Compiled by the Authors*

<sup>87</sup> After Emanuel left his post to run for mayor of Chicago, Senior Advisor Peter M. Rouse served as interim chief of staff from October 1, 2010, to January 13, 2011.

<sup>88</sup> Had title “Acting Chief of Staff”

**TABLE 2****CHIEFS & DEPUTY CHIEFS OF STAFF IN THE OBAMA WHITE HOUSE**

<b>COS</b>	<b>DEPUTY COS</b>
Rahm I. Emanuel [01/20/09-10/1/10]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>James A. Messina (Operations) [01/20/09-01/26/11]</li> <li>Mona K. Sutphen (Policy) [01/20/09-01/26/11]</li> </ul>
William M. Daley [01/13/11-01/27/12]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alyssa Mastromonaco (Operations) [01/27/11-05/22/14]</li> <li>Nancy-Anne DeParle (Policy) [01/27/11-01/25/13]</li> </ul>
Jacob J. Lew [01/27/12-01/25/13]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alyssa Mastromonaco (Operations) [01/27/11-05/22/14]</li> <li>Nancy-Anne DeParle (Policy) [01/27/11-01/25/13]</li> <li>Mark B. Childress (Planning) [01/27/12-05/22/14]</li> </ul>
Denis R. McDonough [01/25/13-01/20/17]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alyssa Mastromonaco (Operations) [01/27/11-05/22/14]</li> <li>Anita J. Decker Breckenridge (Operations) [05/22/14-01/20/17]</li> <li>Rob Nabors (Policy) [01/25/13-05/14/14]</li> <li>Mark B. Childress (Planning) [01/27/12-05/22/14]</li> <li>Kristie Canegallo (Implementation) [05/22/14-01/20/17]</li> </ul>

**TABLE 3****SIZE OF OBAMA OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF BY YEAR**

<b>Year</b>	<b>President</b>	<i>Annual Report to Congress<sup>89</sup></i>
<b>2009</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2010</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2011</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2012</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2013</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2014</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2015</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2016</b>	<b>Obama</b>	<b>11</b>

<sup>89</sup> The Obama administration is the first to release its annual reports to Congress electronically.