White House Structure and Decision Making: Elaborating the Standard Model

CHARLES E. WALCOTT
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University

KAREN M. HULT
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University

A consensus has emerged about how White House staffs should be organized, which we refer to as the “standard model.” Yet recent presidencies have produced various kinds of dissatisfaction with the performance of the White House staff. Here, we explore whether the new normative understanding of White House structuring for decision making offers prescriptions that are as “good” as they might be. Focusing on the limitations of hierarchical structuring and of multiple advocacy, we urge both a more nuanced view of the nature of White House decision making and a more variegated approach to modeling and prescribing appropriate structures.

Over the past seven presidencies, a once-lively debate over the proper size and organization of the president’s White House staff seemingly has been settled. Where once Democrats and Republicans hewed to distinct views, now there appears to be a consensus, subscribed to by leaders of both parties and backed by scholarly research and advocacy (see, e.g., Kumar and Sullivan 2003). We have come to refer to this consensus as the “standard model” of White House staffing, indicating both its widespread acceptance and its ascension to normative status.

The standard model, prefigured by Dwight Eisenhower and first fully realized under Richard Nixon, has proven itself robust over a series of presidencies, including at
least two (Ford and Carter) in which the president initially sought to reject it (see Hult and Walcott 2004). Often characterized, especially in its early incarnation, as dedicated to hierarchy and top-down control, Eisenhower’s creation perhaps is better understood as a more general method of organizing decision making (see, e.g., Walcott and Hult 1995; Henderson 1988; Burke et al. 1989). Specifically, it seeks to routinize the practice of multiple advocacy (George 1980), assuring that presidential decisions will be made in the light of full information concerning available options and the preferences of relevant actors.

Here, we begin with an account of the emergence of the standard model out of the partisan debate over staff structuring that lasted at least until the late 1970s. We argue next that the standard model addresses the obvious need of the contemporary White House for orderly decision-making processes. Then, we look at several analytical elements that the model, as usually discussed, does not fully address, seeking to show how it may be fruitfully elaborated.

Evolution of the Standard Model

The White House is necessarily a hierarchy. No one is the president’s equal. Yet that relationship, although all-important, is insufficient for structuring a staff. In the earliest days of plural professional White House staffers, a degree of additional staff structuring appeared, with both Hoover and Roosevelt designating specific staff members as press secretaries, “political” aides, and speechwriters (e.g., Walcott and Hult 1995). Nevertheless, both FDR and Truman employed key staffers such as Harry Hopkins and Clark Clifford in a variety of capacities while for the most part resisting the imposition of firm job definitions and formal reporting rules. Each president managed the staff in a basically collegial manner, involving himself in the morning staff meetings that set the tone and direction of White House activities. Decision processes often had an improvised quality, with participation somewhat dependent upon availability and chance. Although Roosevelt’s White House was never large, Truman’s topped 200, and his approach to management, more than FDR’s, became the model for his Democratic successors.

Thus, when Dwight Eisenhower introduced more hierarchy and procedures—with a chief of staff, a staff secretariat, a formalized process for “staffing” decision memos to his aides, and clearer job definitions for even the top staff—Democrats looked on with dismay (e.g., Neustadt 1961). This “formalistic” approach (Johnson 1974) was derided as inflexible, overly complex, and smacking too much of a military, not a political, organization. Initially, Ike had few defenders among presidency scholars, most of whom, like Neustadt, took Roosevelt as the standard. Later scholarly treatments of Eisenhower’s system would paint a far more positive portrait (e.g., Greenstein 1982; Henderson 1988;

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1. Nonetheless, Truman, for example, tried a rough separation of policy and implementation and used highly specialized advisers in such matters as foreign affairs. See, e.g., Heller (1980).
2. The “competitive” FDR approach that Richard Tanner Johnson (1974) and others have described generally did not extend to the White House Office per se.
Burke et al. 1989; Walcott and Hult 1994) but the battle lines had been drawn. In the political science literature and in Congress, Democrats were uniformly critical of the Eisenhower model.

John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, advised by such Truman veterans as Neustadt and Clifford, opted for versions of the Truman system, with somewhat more flexibility of assignments and processes than in the Eisenhower White House and, perhaps most importantly, no chief of staff. Instead, the president was at the hub of the “spokes of the wheel,” with a half-dozen or more roughly coequal staffers reporting directly to him. This tendency to transmit organizational philosophy along party lines through White House veterans and their academic apologists is a phenomenon we have dubbed “partisan learning” (Walcott and Hult 1995). It has never been wholly the case that the presidency lacks institutional memory. Rather, that memory until fairly recently has been selective, conditioned by experience, advisory networks, and partisan criticisms arising out of political competition, especially campaigns.

The Kennedy and Johnson White Houses drew mixed reviews, and LBJ in particular came to believe that his required some sort of organizational fix. As a creature of Congress, however, he was not as attuned to structural or managerial issues, and evidently did not focus on them long enough to accomplish significant change (Walcott and Hult 1995, ch. 11). Moreover, by this time, a fair amount of institutionalization had already taken place, regardless of the Democratic commitment to flexibility and collegiality at the top of the staff. For instance, a congressional relations unit, established under Eisenhower, had become a standard White House feature, as had a White House personnel office, which dated to Truman. The White House counsel’s office, despite functioning differently under the two parties, was always in evidence. Likewise, the press office, which traced to Hoover, had become a routine element of the White House. The national security assistant, a job basically conceived by Eisenhower, had been strengthened under JFK and LBJ. To these, Johnson added a specialized domestic policy staff and a staff of full-time speechwriters. Formal structuring, with specialization and internal hierarchy, had become a fact of White House life. Still, the Democrats eschewed a chief of staff and much of the apparatus of staff management and decision structuring that Ike had introduced.

Nixon and the Emergence of the Standard Model

When Richard Nixon assumed the presidency, he had every reason to look to his own partisan background, which of course included service in the Eisenhower White House as vice president. Eisenhower veterans such as Bryce Harlow served as conduits for partisan wisdom, but it was Nixon himself, in concert with chief of staff designate

3. For example, Senator Henry M. Jackson’s subcommittee on the national security policy machinery held hearings on the Eisenhower administration’s national security decision procedures; its report was sharply critical of the “overformalization” of the process. See Jackson (1965) and Henderson (1988, 123-27).

4. At the same time, JFK and LBJ had powerful national security assistants (NSAs), which Ike had deliberately avoided.
H. R. Haldeman, who took the basic GOP model and elaborated it into the first full-blown example of what would become the standard model. Nixon surrounded Haldeman with a relatively elaborate panoply of aides: a cabinet secretary, an appointments secretary (both jobs had become fixtures in the White House beginning with Eisenhower), a personal aide (responsible for “the body”), and several more junior assistants. More important, the new chief of staff instituted a sophisticated management apparatus, prominently featuring the staffing system for circulating policy and political ideas and obtaining comment from relevant administration members, and a “tickler” mechanism for following up on presidential directives and demanding that they be acted upon (Hult and Walcott 2004, ch. 2).

Nixon continued and in some cases elaborated the already developed features of the White House, such as the press office and the congressional liaison staff. Intensely concerned with public and media relations, and possessing a staff with abundant expertise in these areas, he added a communications office at the outset, followed by the first public liaison staff, formalizing the growing presidential practice of reaching out to supportive organized interests. Nor did Nixon neglect structuring for policy. He also created the Domestic Council, an elaboration of LBJ’s domestic policy staff idea, designed to resemble structurally the National Security Council and staff. He experimented with similar innovations in the economic policy sphere. Here, it seems that structural elaboration was less a product of environmental demand than of Nixon’s own concern with gaining maximum leverage over policy from the White House. The choice of particular structures apparently reflected the perceived success of the first “cabinet council plus staff,” the NSC (Hult and Walcott 2004, ch. 7).

One result of Nixon’s initiative was an increase in staff size from approximately 350 to 400 under Johnson to as many as 560 during the final two years of Nixon’s first term, as campaign functionaries (e.g., an advance staff) were added to the White House. In the aftermath of the election, though, reducing the size of the staff became a priority.6

The key to understanding the Nixon White House as well as the definition of the standard model, however, is less the size of the staff or the exact design of its component units. Instead, the central features relate to process. The staffing system, operated by a staff secretary who reported to the chief of staff, was, in effect, a method of surrogate discussion (cf. Hult and Tenpas 2003). Faced with a president who did not much like face-to-face discussion, Haldeman devised a way of putting questions of policy or political strategy—ranging from the largest matters to such minutiae as who should be

5. In this design, the cabinet councils included top executive branch officials and were supported by a presidential adviser in the WHO (e.g., the assistant to the president for domestic policy) who directed a significant staff lodged elsewhere in the Executive Office of the President.

6. See, e.g., Hart (1995a, 1995b). Many of the apparently large increases in staff size in Nixon’s first term reflected the administration’s decision “to eliminate reliance on detailees, to submit an ‘honest budget,’ and to ask Congress to pay for the actual size of the staff” (Walcott and Hult 1999, 640). Between 1970 and 1971, for instance, the full-time White House and special projects staffs rose from 345 to 555; during the same period, however, the number of detailees decreased from 287 to 17, producing an aggregate decrease in the size of the staff.
invited to the White House—into memo form. These memos were systematically circulated among all members of the administration (and occasionally beyond) whose inputs were valued, by virtue of either the relevance of their jobs or respect for their judgment. These memos presented options, and invited each solicited individual to both note a preference and provide an explanation. Such paper passed through Haldeman’s office (and, on important matters, through Haldeman himself) to the president. Haldeman’s control of the staffing system, along with his supervision of the scheduling of the president’s time, clearly was a source of considerable power. Most Nixon insiders, it should be noted, viewed Haldeman as an “honest broker,” with few if any policy axes to grind (Hult and Walcott 2004, ch. 2).

Haldeman’s apparatus had an implementation element as well. Within the White House, Haldeman and his aides in the chief of staff’s office insisted upon strict discipline and prompt carrying out of assigned tasks. “Ticklers” reminded Haldeman’s staff of assignments’ due dates, and tardy responses typically were met with stern warnings and instructions. Often cited as evidence of the malevolent influence of hierarchy and of Haldeman’s power, the tickler mechanism was (and is) actually a business management staple. Haldeman’s aggressive use of it was unusual, however, and reports of a climate of anxiety among presidential staff were credible (Hult and Walcott 2004, ch. 2).

Predictably, the Nixon White House drew criticism from Democrats, much of it reminiscent of that directed at Eisenhower. In addition to complaints about excessive hierarchy and the evident isolation of the president from the give-and-take of ideas, Nixon and his aides were accused of being obsessed with secrecy and the prevention of leaks. Then, in the aftermath of the Watergate revelations, questions focused in part on whether the staff structuring of the Nixon White House was culpable. Did not the combination of a large, hierarchical staff and Haldeman’s aggressive management style somehow produce or encourage a willingness to engage in lawbreaking? Some, notably Thomas Cronin (1973), argued that it did.

As plausible as the linkage between this sort of criticism of the staff and the obviously disastrous outcome might have been, it does not hold up well upon later inspection. In the case of Watergate, after all, most of the “action” was at the Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP, or as the press liked to call it, CREEP), not the White House. More importantly, the misdeeds that emanated from the Nixon White House were conspiracies: they involved few people and extreme secrecy. The logic of the Nixon staffing system, in contrast, rested on the sharing of information and opinion. It seems more reasonable to argue, as Haldeman himself did, that Watergate and related abuses were not products of the system, but rather of deliberate avoidance of the system. Ultimately, the blame must rest upon Nixon personally, along with a few aides, not upon the organizational arrangements or the size of the White House staff.

The Search for Alternatives

Nevertheless, Nixon’s immediate successors evidently accepted the verdict that the staffing system was at least partially to blame for the president’s downfall. Both Gerald
Ford and Jimmy Carter were at pains to appear as unlike Nixon as possible, and that included, in theory at least, the way they organized and ran their White Houses. Ford, whom Nixon had chosen as vice president, bore a particular burden. In contrast with Nixon’s penchant for secrecy, Ford immediately declared his to be an “open” administration, formally eschewing a chief of staff and opting instead for a spokes-of-the-wheel arrangement designed to ensure that the president did not become isolated or his gatekeeper(s) too powerful. This was congenial for the former House leader, who unlike his predecessor, preferred dealing with issues through face-to-face meetings.

But President Ford entered an administration in midstream, with a staff in place and well-established routines for conducting the regular business of the White House. Although he removed several of Nixon’s top aides, including Chief of Staff Al Haig and anyone tainted by Watergate, the new president soon found that he needed to rely upon the second-level organizational infrastructure that carried over from Nixon. This reliance was implied in his choice of Donald Rumsfeld, a Ford intimate but also a Nixon veteran, as staff coordinator. Steeped in the processes of the Nixon White House, Rumsfeld and his protégé and eventual successor Richard Cheney in effect saw to it that the routines worked for Ford much as they had for Nixon. Despite fierce protests by long-time Ford aides, notably counselor Robert Hartmann (1980), the Nixon staff system survived the transition remarkably intact. Only the communications office, besmirched under Nixon by its involvement in Watergate-related events, was greatly reduced in size and stature. Constrained by his circumstances, Ford not only was unable to free himself from the standard model, but also finally reconciled himself to it.

Elected in large part because he was a Washington “outsider,” Jimmy Carter was not constrained by his predecessor’s practices. Indeed, a management study made for him during the transition recommended substantial changes in the structuring of the White House. Carter heeded much of this advice. His initial design for the White House staff was a clear attempt to move back to the traditional Democratic model. There would be no chief of staff, but rather numerous spokes, including cabinet members, surrounding the presidential hub; routine management was entrusted to a committee of senior staff. Yet, below the top levels, virtually all of Nixon’s (and Ford’s) structures survived, including the public liaison office. Only communications was not in evidence, reduced to being a subsidiary of the press office. Although Carter abandoned cabinet councils in structuring consideration of domestic and economic policy, he did not disband the accompanying policy staffs. Thus, rather than returning to the seemingly “less-structured” White Houses of Truman or even Kennedy, Carter essentially overlaid a “collegial” (Johnson 1974) apparatus of senior staff on top of a version of the standard model. Indeed, so clearly defined were the duties of the various White House units that the retrospective criticism of many Carter staffers has been that these structures were overly compartmentalized and lacked sufficient coordination and integration (Hult and Walcott 2004).

Carter’s plan for the White House had another element, also shared with Ford: shrinking the staff. Ford, reacting to the criticism of Nixon’s huge staff, had downsized it to about 450 (which, in fact, is roughly what Nixon had planned to do after the 1972 election). Carter was more ambitious, determining that the staff should be no larger than
351 (Hart 1995b, 199). No one seems quite sure where that number came from, but it was adhered to religiously, and it certainly was consistent with the idea of getting back to the leaner, more flexible White House organization long admired by Democrats. The resulting cuts were partly deceptive (e.g., shifting many White House Office [WHO] careerists to a new Office of Administration in the Executive Office of the President [EOP], using detailers on short details), but much of the cutting was real and meaningful (Dickinson 1997; Hart 1995a; Walcott and Hult 1999). Unfortunately, the main impact, apart from slightly shrinking the White House budget, was to weaken the capacity of important elements of the WHO, such as the speechwriting staff, to support the president (Hult and Walcott 2001; Walcott and Hult 1999, 652-53). Meanwhile, none of these efforts produced a staff small enough to be effectively managed without a chief of staff or formalized decision processes.

About two and a half years into his presidency, Jimmy Carter threw in the towel as far as overall White House structuring was concerned. In the last of three significant reorganizations, he appointed top aide Hamilton Jordan as chief of staff. Acknowledging that he was no manager, Jordan brought in corporate executive Alonzo McDonald as his deputy. By most accounts, the Carter White House ran more efficiently during its final eighteen months under Jordan and his successor, Jack Watson. More importantly for our purposes here, Carter’s abandonment of the “spokes” strategy and capitulation to more hierarchical structuring provide strong evidence that the standard model had finally prevailed across party lines.

The Standard Model as Norm

Unsurprisingly, Carter’s Republican successors maintained the same basic organizational model in their White Houses. In his first term, Ronald Reagan experimented with a widely touted “troika” arrangement, where three top advisers—James Baker III, Edwin Meese, and Michael Deaver—had roughly coequal status. To some, this seemed to be a move away from the standard model (e.g., Campbell 1986, 93ff). Nonetheless, Baker clearly was the chief of staff. The fact that Meese, the domestic policy czar, had formally equal status was really not novel. Counselors to the president (Meese’s title) had enjoyed similar status dating back to Bryce Harlow at the outset of the Nixon administration. Because Ford likewise had counselors (Hartmann and John Marsh), one could as easily claim that this arrangement had come to be an expected part of the standard model—the Republican version, at least. At any rate, Reagan’s second term saw a less complex (and far less successful) arrangement, with a chief of staff (initially Donald Regan) clearly at the apex of the staff hierarchy. George H. W. Bush followed suit with John Sununu and his successors, including James Baker.

Carter’s obsession with staff size departed the White House with him. Reagan and Bush I allowed the official (budgeted) size of the staff to float back up to around 400-

7. At least half of this number was more permanent, “non-political” staff. See, for example, Patterson (2000), especially ch. 22; and Walcott and Hult (1999).
450, roughly where it had been when Ford left office. Complaints about inadequate staffing of various offices no longer were heard.

The Clinton Experience

The standard model got another acid test with the arrival of the next Democratic president, Bill Clinton. Formally, Clinton accepted the model, which by now had even received lukewarm endorsement from, for example, Richard Neustadt (1990). However, Clinton deliberately installed a “weak” chief of staff, his old friend Mack McLarty, who did not have a mandate to crack the whip in the manner of most of his predecessors (Walcott et al. 2003). Instead, Clinton, like Carter, hoped to function as the hub of the staff wheel, at least where policy decisions were concerned. The resulting disorganization was famously labeled a “madhouse” in Jeffrey Birnbaum’s (1996) scathing account. Finally understanding that his approach was not working—and was costing him heavily in terms of the esteem of the Washington community—Clinton brought in Leon Panetta, whose political career traced back to service in the first Nixon administration, to shape up the staff. Panetta largely succeeded (Walcott et al. 2003). Although the perception of the “madhouse” took far longer to fade, if indeed it ever did, the reality under Panetta and his successors was a reasonably smoothly functioning version of the standard model.

Clinton also reproduced a version of Carter’s mistake regarding the size of the White House staff. Less a policy commitment than an ill-advised campaign promise, Clinton’s determination to shrink the staff resulted mainly in the dismissal of nonpolitical staff such as White House telephone operators and, more controversially, aides in the White House Travel Office. This provoked widespread criticism and reinforced the view of critics that the Clintons were pathologically prone to politicization. Ultimately, the size of the Clinton White House came to resemble its predecessors. Apparently, in the absence of large new units, a kind of equilibrium had been reached.

The Establishment Response

Although the Clinton White House recovered, many in Washington still recalled its early problems with horror. This led to a major response from the presidency-watching element of the Washington, DC think-tank/academic complex. Several organizations, including the Center for the Study of the Presidency, the Heritage Foundation, the Baker Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Brookings Institution, launched projects designed to facilitate a smoother and more successful presidential transition in 2000-01. Among the elements of the advice that flowed from these initiatives was one constant: hew to the standard model.

Perhaps the most ambitious effort was the White House 2001 Project,8 funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and run under the aegis of both AEI and Brookings. Schol-
ars working with the project produced a series of essays intended to guide the transition process, looking to, for example, the Reagan administration as a successful model and the Clinton experience as an object lesson on how not to launch a new presidency (e.g., Burke 2003). Other teams of scholars, working from roughly 80 interviews with former top White House officials, generated seven essays discussing, in both descriptive detail and normative exhortation, seven “key” offices within the White House. The project’s work, summarized in White House World (Kumar and Sullivan 2003), presents the most detailed portrait to date of the inner workings of the contemporary White House. The message to the incoming president (whoever that would be) was clear: organize the White House in the way that has, by virtual consensus, been found to be the most successful, and do not dally with Carterian or Clintonian heresies.

Of course, there was little need to tell any of this to George W. Bush, whose top appointees and advisers included Rumsfeld and Cheney, and whose chief of staff would be Andrew Card, a deputy chief of staff in the first Bush administration. The lesson probably would have proven redundant to Al Gore as well, because he had witnessed the early disarray under Clinton and surely would have been loathe to repeat it. The real significance of the emergence of such a strong consensus on White House organization will most likely be felt in subsequent administrations that, more like Carter’s or Clinton’s, are organized by presidents and staffs that are relatively new to Washington. This agreement on staff structuring would seem to constitute progress, and it refutes the old saw that the White House has no institutional memory. Not only is the memory very much in evidence; it is now codified. An incoming president who ignores such conventional wisdom will do so at immediate peril to his or her reputation inside the Beltway.

### Thinking Beyond the Standard Model

Before concluding with satisfaction that the problem of presidential staffing has been solved, however, it seems reasonable, at least for the sake of argument, to critically explore the standard model. Certainly, its reputation, the reports of White House insiders, and even the sometimes-grudging testimony of scholars suggest that the model “works.” Exactly what “working” involves, though, is somewhat less clear. Moreover, whether the standard model (or some close variant) is a complete prescription for organizing the White House can be questioned. In this section, we sketch some of the dimensions of an exploration that begins to address such issues.

### Why Is the Standard Model Accepted?

Perhaps the primary reason for the widespread acceptance of the necessity, if not always the desirability, of the standard model revolves around the evident need for sys-

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9. Prominent among them was the office of the chief of staff—probably the most obvious defining characteristic of the standard model. The other units profiled were the offices of White House counsel, communications, personnel, press secretary, management and administration, and staff secretary.

10. George W. Bush, of course, also had seen the difficulties that a too-dominant chief of staff could produce; indeed, he was the one who ultimately asked for John Sununu’s resignation.
tematic coordination and supervision in the institutional presidency. In recent decades, the WHO has come to employ close to 450 staffers (plus others in the EOP policy staffs) and to include numerous specialized units; it is at the center of the evident politicization and centralization in the larger executive branch. The presidency also is enmeshed in an environment of arguably rising complexity, uncertainty, and volatility (but see Neustadt 2001). In such a context, presidents striving to be effective in pursuing their political and policy objectives are expected to benefit from orderly flows of information that include the perspectives of and debates among relevant actors and that reach the Oval Office in a timely fashion for necessary decisions. In effect, multiple advocacy decision processes are required—not only to assure that relevant information is available, but also to guarantee participation rights to those who have reason to expect them.

Furthermore, once presidential decisions are made, procedures also are needed to assign responsibility for and to monitor their execution. Features of the standard model increase the likelihood of such coordination. Assuring that decision memos and presidential speech drafts are put through systematic clearance processes operated by a staff secretariat, for example, can help reduce the risk of ad hoc decision making. Former chiefs of staff agree about the importance of protecting presidents against making “oh, by the way” decisions (e.g., Jack Watson, in Kernell and Popkin 1986), in which special pleas produce ill-considered responses, especially from distracted presidents.

Meanwhile, responding to similar demands for orderly information flow, inclusion of relevant participants, and oversight of implementation, a “standard model” of sorts has surfaced in the national security advisory system. The two Bush and the Clinton administrations demonstrated “unprecedented continuity in the formal structure of the NSC system, reflected best in the continuation of the Principals and Deputies committees.... A general consensus seems to have emerged on the appropriate role of the national security adviser,” and rules “for the day-to-day activities of the NSC staff appear to be in place” (Inderfurth and Johnson 2004, 106; cf. Zegart 1999).

Nonetheless, the standard model is scarcely a counsel of perfection. As with rules and standard operating procedures more generally, the model’s structuring and processes are aimed at increasing the reliability of presidential and White House activities. They also can aid individual presidents in economizing on and better focusing their scarce time and energy as well as in coping with large numbers of ambitious and sometimes fractious White House aides.

Indeed, some of those who admire the standard model do so out of evident resignation. Matthew Dickinson (2003, 45ff), for instance, contends that moving away from the standard model would involve shrinking the size and reducing the differentiation of the White House Office. Yet the prevailing political and governing environments evidently make those very features of the staff virtual necessities as presidents seek to cope with increased political uncertainty.11 Organizational inertia and so-called nonpartisan learning in matters of White House staff structuring might well reinforce reliance on the standard model (see, e.g., Hult and Walcott 2004, chs. 1-2). If indeed the standard

11. Key elements of the environment include “a polarized Congress, numerous narrowly focused and clashing interest groups, an adversarial media, and a wary public” (Dickinson 2003, 45).
model has become part of the “legitimating creed” of White House staff organization, as Kernell appears to suggest (1986, 224), then it may be especially resistant to change. Rather than conceiving of wholesale alternatives, therefore, it may make more practical sense to think in terms of fleshing out the basic model by examining some of the factors that create contingencies for structuring White House decision processes.

Beyond Division of Labor

Essential to the standard model is a division of the White House into a more-or-less standard set of offices, several of which are described in detail by Kumar and Sullivan (2003). Given the size and scope of contemporary White House operations, there really is no alternative to this kind of organization. Yet, such bureaucratic organization—characterized by hierarchy, division of labor, specialization, and standard operating procedures—also is vulnerable to well-known pathologies. One of these, which became especially problematic in the Carter White House, is “compartmentalization,”12 or the tendency of individual units to communicate primarily among themselves, rather than across specializations. This typically produces what March and Simon (1958) called “internalization of subgoals,” the failure to see one’s immediate objectives in the context of the larger organization’s (i.e., the president’s or the presidency’s) broader purposes.

In our analyses of White House governance, a central theme has been of critical significance in organizations suffused by hierarchy of additional “governance structures,” especially those that precisely address the compartmentalization problem by providing links across formal lines of authority and communication. These structures most often are informal; that is, they typically are not found on organization charts, but involve recurring gatherings (physical or virtual) of individuals representing different parts of the White House and larger executive branch. Whether oriented toward formulating communications strategy (like Nixon’s “attack group”), deliberating over substance and strategy around policy issues (such as Carter’s energy task force), or adjusting to the unpredictability of political and policy environments (e.g., George W. Bush’s post-9/11 “war cabinet”; Woodward 2002), such structures give the White House capabilities that mere hierarchy lacks. When ad hoc structural responses are a normal part of the White House decision-making repertoire, there is a flexibility in the face of emergencies, volatile situations, or novel circumstances that cannot be achieved by more bureaucratic structuring alone (cf. Hult 2000, 2003; Walcott and Hult 2004).

Parenthetically, it probably should be noted that criticisms of the standard model, beginning with those directed at Eisenhower, have tended to miss the existence and the frequent importance of informal governance structures.13 Both Eisenhower and Nixon were well aware of the need for adaptability and communications links across functional areas, and both White Houses were notable for the proliferation of such structures (cf. Walcott and Hult 1995; Hult and Walcott 2004).

12. In recent times, this has been referred to with metaphors such as “stovepipes,” or, at land-grant universities, “silos.”

13. A key exception is Burke et al. (1989).
Kinds of Multiple Advocacy

The alleged virtues of group decision making, face-to-face or otherwise, are well documented in the literature of small-group social psychology (e.g., Bogenrieder and Nooteboom 2004; Farnham 2004; Hare 1994). Multiple participants expand a group's fund of information while also providing a capacity for error correction. “Groupthink” occurs, in fact, when diverse participants begin to subordinate their independence, and can be averted if groups retain their respect for the distinctive perspectives brought by their members. The purpose and meaning of broad participation, however, can vary according to a variable that does not always surface in normative discussions of decision making: decision type.

In prior work (cf. Hult and Walcott 1990, 2004), we have tried to distinguish between collegial decision making under conditions of uncertainty and of controversy. In the former circumstances, where “right” answers are not apparent and problem solving is required, the contribution of representation and group processes is the accumulation of expertise and examination of available knowledge. Thus, participation “rights” need to be accorded to those who can bring problem-solving skills or experience to the task, more or less irrespective of these persons’ organizational positions (but see Larson 2003, 6ff). However, when conflict surfaces, when a decision hinges upon arguments over what is right (involving primary ends, the means to attaining them, or both), a different kind of mix is required. In such instances, the most important basis for participation is representation of key stakeholders and perspectives (see, e.g., Haas 2003, 256). Decisions will be judged in large part according to criteria of process fairness, the essence of which is that all those with a legitimate stake in the outcome have the opportunity to state their case. Whether one is talking about face-to-face arguments or the collection of opinions via decision memos, inclusiveness is essential. Among the concerns expressed, for example, about George W. Bush’s decision to go to war with Iraq has been the evident exclusion from administration discussions of strong critics of intelligence regarding the presence of weapons of mass destruction (e.g., Jehl 2004; Woodward 2004).

Sullivan (2004) has noted that one of the “dilemmas” of White House staff management is the need to strike a balance between orderly decision processes, which may thwart individuals’ ambitions, and staff members’ energy and commitment borne of precisely those ambitions. This is not necessarily an argument against carefully designed decision processes, but it certainly is a warning against the kind of formalism that can render such process perfunctory. Staffers’ drive to make a difference will best be preserved when collegial processes give the most meaningful voice possible to the possessors of relevant expertise and/or the advocates for important values or interests.

Limits to Multiple Advocacy

The contributions of the structuring of decision processes to the quality of decision outcomes, of course, may be too frequently assumed and sometimes overstated. Instead, Stanley Renshon and Deborah Welch Larson (2003), for example, advocate more systematic probing of the dimensions and the contributions of “good judgment,” an indi-
vidual-level construct, in foreign-policy decision making. Renshon contends that emphasizing decision process has reached “the point of diminishing returns” (2003, 26). Robert Haas, however, observes that judgment and process need not be viewed as competing or substitutable influences: “Good judgment can also be promoted by institutional arrangements as well as by intelligent discipline” (2003, 255).

Moreover, even if one accepts the importance of decision processes in shaping presidential decisions, in any such process there comes a time for the advocacy to give way or at least evolve. Clearly, when a president has made a choice, arguing against it can become a futile distraction (e.g., Clarke 2004). Of course, what this really does is shifts the decision problem from one of what to do to one of how to do it; this in turn requires the participation of those with relevant expertise. In one sense, complex “decisions” have no necessary endpoint, potentially shifting from goals to implementation to evaluation, and then back to something like the starting point again, often with considerable blurring of boundaries, sequence, and decision points. Viewed this way, one can argue that the policy or political evaluation aspect of a decision process may well suggest that the decision maker’s need to depend upon specialized expertise can render multiple, interested actors more of a problem than an asset.

Kowert (2002) has suggested an additional way that multiple advocacy of policy alternatives can become dysfunctional. Comparing decision processes under Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan, Kowert contends that the individual president matters greatly in the design of a successful process. Specifically, some presidents, like Eisenhower, are best served by the presentation of and debate over a wide range of options, much as Janis (1982) recommends in his discussions of how to avoid groupthink. Other presidents, however, like Reagan, will become overloaded in the face of too much advocacy, and the decision process risks “deadlock,” essentially the opposite of groupthink. Decision makers of this sort, Kowert argues, require fewer, more controlled inputs. Senior advisors (such as vice presidents, national security assistants, and chiefs of staff) also might differ on this dimension, with additional impact on decision making.

Last, we consider Sullivan’s (2004) second “dilemma” for White House operations: “reaction vs. projection.” The question is how to build a capacity for long-range thinking and planning into an institution that tends to become consumed by the need to react swiftly to a constantly changing environment. “Planning” can be many things, some of them instrumental and mundane. Yet at its highest level—the determination of national goals and grand strategy to achieve them—planning can resemble a difficult strategic game. Such games, it might be argued, are best played by individuals, who can consult their core values in determining ends, and can formulate strategy by juggling and balancing the multitude of possibilities and contingencies contained in any large

14. Even here, of course, decision structuring may be relevant. Some presidents may need prodding or encouragement either to reach a conclusion (i.e., to come to “decision closure”) or not to decide too hastily. That is, presidents may benefit from not only an “honest broker” but also other aspects of what George (1980) referred to as a “custodian-manager” (p. 195ff). George lists six “sub-tasks” of such a manager, most of which seem more relevant to multiple advocacy than to hierarchy. The sixth (“monitoring the workings of the policymaking process to identify possibly dangerous malfunctions and instituting appropriate corrective action”; p. 196) might also include these more hierarchical activities.
endeavor. In this construction, the strategist resembles a chess player, and chess is not a team game.

These considerations scarcely mean that group processes have no role in strategy planning. Yet they do suggest that there may also be a realm in which the individual, especially the single individual with the greatest responsibility for the outcome, must find ways to keep advocacy at bay and seize the reins individually for a time.

Conclusion

Hierarchy and formalized decision processes are essential in the contemporary White House. They allow the president and his top aides the opportunities to see that decision making is structured in a manner congruent with the nature of the problem, and to ensure that the president’s preferences control the outcomes. The staffing system that has evolved as an element of the standard model is an essential supplement to face-to-face advocacy in presidential decision making. The standard model has become a normative standard for good reason.

Our argument here has been simply that there is more to the model, and thus more to addressing the challenge of presidential decision making, than hierarchy and multiple advocacy. Hierarchy must be supplemented by mostly nonhierarchical structuring in order to overcome some of the standard pathologies of bureaucratization. Multiple advocacy is a more nuanced idea—or set of ideas—than sometimes presented. For some purposes, indeed, the multiple advocates may need to stand down and allow the possessor of the “loneliest job in the world” to do the job more or less alone.

References


