Introduction

“Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans.” ~President John F. Kennedy, January 20, 1961

With his Inaugural Address, President John F. Kennedy asked his fellow Americans to join a new era of leaders committed to freedom. Like every president since FDR, he called on the best and brightest to join him in carrying out the people’s business to make the country and the world a better place.

Now your party has called on you.

In recognition of your expertise, judgment, and character, either President George W. Bush has commissioned you to serve as an advisor in the White House Office (WHO), or Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean has asked you to lead the opposition party. As a trusted advisor, your mission is to craft the party agenda to reflect the President’s and DNC chair’s beliefs, influence legislation reflecting those priorities, and use all available means of political persuasion to advance them into law.

History and Background

The White House has not always been as it is today – a stunning symbol of power and democracy known throughout the world. The White House staff was initially very small, consisting of one or two people whose salaries were paid directly by the President. For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, Presidents conducted all business themselves – even personally answering the telephone and opening mail. An official White House Secretary was not hired until Congress appropriated $2,500 for the position in 1857.

Over the course of the 19th century, the White House became overcrowded and could not meet the needs of a growing executive. The cramped second floor accommodated the Presidential living quarters and the 13-person executive office, as well as any guests. In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt responded to the overcrowding by ordering the construction of annexes to the east and west sides. The east annex would be for receiving guests, including the public, while the west addition would provide a wing entirely devoted to executive workspace. Roosevelt succeeded in keeping the home and office of the President in the same building. President William Howard Taft authorized construction of the first Oval Office in 1929.

The foundation for the modern executive branch was laid in 1939, when the Brownlow Commission – a panel of political science and public administration experts appointed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt – issued its report. The report boldly and clearly asserted, “the President needs help.” Roosevelt’s New Deal had greatly expanded the reach of federal government policies and required a growing number of people to execute it.

Congress responded by approving the creation of the Executive Office of the President (EOP), composed of the White House Office and the precursor of the Office of Management and Budget. This doubled the size of the executive branch, and served as the basis for the complex organization that is the modern White House.

The West Wing Today: The Epicenter of Power

From humble beginnings, the Executive Office of the President now employs 2000-2500 with a budget of $300 to $400 million. Though a subunit of the EOP, the White House Office is the core of the Presidential staff. The White House Office is composed of the closest advisors to the President, numbering about 400. The most important advisors work in
the West Wing of the White House and the rest serve in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

The President has great discretion in organizing the staff and functions of the WHO, causing many observers to remark that the White House reinvents itself with every administration. The President determines the creation of positions, the allocation of responsibilities, the chain of command, and how and from whom he receives information and advice.

Although the organization may vary greatly from administration to administration, there are some constants. Most President have a team of WHO staff to deal with congressional affairs, political affairs, foreign policy, the economy, domestic policy, speechwriting, communications, the cabinet, interest groups, and Presidential appointments. All Presidents rely heavily on their staffs for information and advice and to complete the considerable work of the office.

Today, the West Wing of the White House is a vibrant hub of executive activity. It is crowded, with small offices available only to the President’s core staffers and their assistants. Although the adjacent Eisenhower Executive Office Building offers grand workspaces, you cherish the cramped quarters in closest proximity to the most powerful man in the world. If you are in the DNC, you cling to the hope that you will be working there following the next election.

The West Wing is also active, as a president’s work is never done. Advisors help the president set his agenda, formulate policy, write speeches, persuade legislators, brief the press, meet with diplomats, monitor national security threats, and advise the president – all within a two-story wing.

Unmatched Responsibility

The honor of working here carries with it unmatched responsibility. The activity of several hundred dedicated, capable professionals is necessary for one simple reason: it is in the West Wing that presidents make the decisions that make history. The president must rely heavily on the expertise, talents, and judgment of his top advisors in order to accomplish anything.

The tasks that must be completed to fulfill the president’s charge are nearly endless. White House staffers advise the president on every major domestic policy area – including the economy, domestic security, the environment, health care, and education – while others monitor foreign relations with every nation in the world. They help him set his agenda, and then consider policies from every angle, taking into consideration practical as well as political consequences.

Political Persuasion

As they consider policy questions ranging from “What should be done to increase GDP growth?” to “What is the best means for encouraging democracy in the Middle East?,” staffers also monitor political concerns. This includes such challenges as persuading Congress, preparing speeches for the American people, and organizing public appearances. Once the president has decided on his priorities and the correct course of action, members of his White House Office must persuade the public, Congress, and the Cabinet to execute the decisions. This is not easy, however. Just as the Founders envisioned, the president is the energizing force in the republic. But energy alone is not enough – he needs the support of the legislature to make laws and the entire executive branch to execute them, and he needs you to help him get that support. Staffers must negotiate a web of pressure applied by the Congress, the courts, interest groups, government agencies, departments, and other nations. As a result, the White House is overcome each day with a workload that forces every staffer to work at full capacity to stay ahead of the curve. Of course, while staying on top of day to day concerns, advisors must also keep an eye on the big picture. A president is judged by his ability to pass his agenda; staffers must keep him focused on his long-term priorities while working each day to achieve them.

Many Jobs in One

Each of the president’s top advisors has an area of expertise and a formal area of responsibility. They also simultaneously perform many roles, such as engaging in policy debate during staff meetings, devising political strategies, persuading Congress, or stumping for the president’s policies with the press and public. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they must be ready to respond at a moment’s notice to any crisis – domestic or international – that comes before the president.
Committee Structure and Purpose

Here at HMCE, the West Wing infuses the conference with an energizing sense of partisanship. The West Wing Committee is composed of two groups, the White House and the Democratic National Committee. The White House represents the interests of the president, while the DNC directs the Democrats as the opposition party. Following the initial introduction, the two groups will function separately.

The Harvard staffers will take the role of the White House and DNC Chiefs of Staff. They will guide you to help ensure that the president’s and DNC chair’s goals are met, but keep in mind that this is the conference’s most student-directed committee. You have a great deal of freedom to do your best for your party.

As the president and DNC chair are the leaders of their respective parties, the White House and DNC head up the effort to craft a coherent party agenda, message, and political strategy. However, they cannot do it by themselves. The input of party members should be considered when making such decisions in order to foster party unity and loyalty.

Ultimately, your goal is to help the president or DNC chair determine his agenda. Then you must advance that agenda using political persuasion. This requires the support of a broad coalition and takes many forms.

At the Conference

General Schedule: No Typical Days

With the continuous need to respond to new developments around the world, there is no such thing as a typical day for the White House or DNC. Instead, staffers plan their schedules around a number of priorities reflecting the president’s goals. They decide what needs to be accomplished in the four-year term, and break it down by year, month, week, and day. Then they execute the plan. The drive to get the job done provides structure to the chaos. During the HMCE weekend, White House and DNC staffers will complete four primary tasks, as well as a number of secondary functions.

These primary tasks will command a majority of your time:

- Debate and write party platforms and set White House and DNC agenda. The platform is a statement of the party’s beliefs and convictions that will be voted on by the Congress. The White House and DNC agenda differ from the party platform in that they are a more limited list of the president’s or DNC chair’s top priorities, rather than a complete statement of beliefs. The agenda is developed in consultation with the president or DNC chair.
- Write the State of the Union Address or Democratic Response and present it before Congress
- Prepare for and conduct a press briefing with the HMCE print media
- Engage in a debate between the White House and DNC over the party platforms, agendas, and other national issues

The secondary functions will be completed if time remains:

- Conduct message meetings
- Lobby legislators from appropriate committees
- Maintain presence in Congressional committees to stay informed on proceedings
- Interview with HMCE print media
- Strategically reveal information to the press
- Conduct opinion polling
- Obtain Cabinet support for agenda
- Lobby and mobilize interest groups
- Write strategy memos to keep legislators loyal to the party line

Closer to the conference, the West Wing staff will provide you with updates that give helpful tips for accomplishing the major objectives, such as setting the agenda, writing the State of the Union, conducting press briefings, and using resources of political capital to persuade legislators.

First Priority: Party Platforms

For now, know that the first task to be accomplished by both the White House and DNC will be to debate and amend their respective parties’ platform. The platforms are statements of the convictions and beliefs of the entire party, and serve as guides for legislators, constituents, and the press throughout the conference.
At the end of this guide, each of you will receive a copy of the party platforms passed by the party caucuses at last year’s conference, which will serve as the foundation for the 2007 party platforms. Look over your party’s platform and decide what needs to be changed. Are there some positions that are no longer relevant? Has some world event or timely policy discussion created the need for a new priority?

Be prepared to debate and make these changes during the first committee session. This is the first priority because, once the platforms are complete, they will be presented immediately to the House and Senate large party caucuses for ratification. After that, we will turn our attention to the myriad other tasks that must be accomplished. The West Wing hits the ground running, and never really slows down.

There’s No “I” in “Team”

The list of tasks may seem daunting, but you are not expected to do all of these tasks yourself. Instead, the White House and DNC operate under the principle of shared responsibility. Each staffer is in charge of a specific area of operation based on his or her expertise. Yet at the same time, everyone works together in teams to make sure the president’s or the DNC chair’s objectives are met. For example, the speechwriter is in charge of writing speeches. But to write the State of the Union Address, she collaborates with the communications director and the rest of the staff. Everyone in the White House or DNC is on the same team, so everything is a shared effort. You work on whatever is the president’s or DNC chair’s highest priority – what needs to be done right now.

Specific Roles and Areas of Responsibility

Closer to the conference, you will receive an update that provides a more detailed description of each role, but the following are the basic areas of responsibility:

Director, Office of Political Affairs: Responsible for developing and coordinating political strategy.
Opposition Analyst Consultant: Responsible for researching and monitoring the efforts of the opposition party.
Special Assistant for Policy: Responsible for developing party policy initiatives.

Liaison to the House: Responsible for maintaining strong relationships with Congressmen and lobbying the House of Representatives.
Liaison to the Senate: Responsible for maintaining strong relationships with Senators and lobbying the Senate.
Director of Communications: Responsible for creating and coordinating the party’s “message.”
Press Secretary: Responsible for dealing with the Press.
Speechwriter: Responsible for writing speeches, notably the State of the Union or Democratic Response.
Director, Office of Public Liaison: Responsible for addressing the concerns of interest groups.
Chief Counsel: Responsible for the party’s legal team.
Senior Advisor: Responsible for special projects, such as conducting opinion polls and obtaining cabinet support.

Preparing for the Conference

The freedom to interact with every committee gives West Wing delegates the power to influence the entire course of the conference. Your ability to do so, however, hinges entirely on your preparedness. Follow this plan of action, and you will be ready to serve.

Appointment to West Wing Committee

When you are notified of your selection to the West Wing, you will receive your role assignment in the White House or DNC. To begin your research, you should read the issue briefings written for committees by HMCE staffers: pay special attention to the congressional topics, but you should also take a look at topics of interest from the international committees. You may also want to familiarize yourself with the American political scene by starting to read the New York Times or Washington Post.

Researching Your Way to Expertise

First, read the briefings written by the HMCE staff. The briefings provide excellent outlines of the issues to be discussed and go into a fair amount of detail on the various points of debate that will be guiding the legislators. In these briefings, you should keep a particularly close eye on the “Focus of Debate” and “Possible Solutions” sections, as they will address your questions most directly.

By the time you have read the briefings, you should have...
a good idea of the types of issues legislators will be addressing, as well as the concerns and goals of the executive branch regarding the issue. Members of Congress will reference information from these sections when you are lobbying them, so you should be sure you can address these quickly and accurately.

The next step is to conduct your own research. Keep an eye out for what the president or Democrats have to say about the issue. To start your research, check out the following sources:

- The bibliography of sources used in the HMCE issue briefing.
- The White House and DNC websites, www.whitehouse.gov and www.democrats.org, respectively. They provide both issue briefs and biographical information for your role.
- Congressional Quarterly. CQ issue briefs are available online at CQ.com and in many libraries.
- Congressional Research Reports. CRS Reports may be obtained by contacting a Congressman or Senator’s office. Make sure to give congressional staff plenty of time to get CRS materials to you because they are sometimes not available. Some CRS reports are now available on the web but they are hard to find – try googling “CRS” and your issue to track them down.
- Newspapers, magazines, and online outlets such as NYTimes.com, washingtonpost.com, CNN.com, ABCNews.com. They will provide you with up-to-date information on how your issue has changed with recent events.
- Google. Try searching for “Bush” or “Democratic National Committee” and your issue. It should lead you to websites with a wealth of information.

If you have any questions, please email the Harvard staff, who will be glad to help.

You should also try to find out as much as you can about the biography of the specific person you are role playing. It will show you how they got to the position they are in today. However, you will find it difficult to find information on the specific personal views of the role you are playing. You likely will not find what the White House Communications Director thinks about an issue; only what the president thinks. Therefore, use the views of the president or party as a guide to how your role would feel about each issue. Behind the scenes, staffers disagree frequently and challenge each other to refine their beliefs. However, once the president has made a decision, you must support him publicly or risk losing your job. If you disagree, you will have a chance to persuade the decision-maker, but, in the end, you “serve at the pleasure of the president.”

**Conclusion**

“I Serve at the Pleasure of the President”

As a member of the White House Office or the staff of the DNC, you have proven yourself to be one of the nation’s most capable public servants. You possess deep convictions, strong opinions, expert knowledge, and savvy political skills. You know that in the private sector you could parlay these skills into a healthy salary – but you’re not with a corporation yet. You work long hours in cramped offices and can’t remember the last time you had a social life. And on top of it all, you don’t even get to take credit for your successes. Instead, as your commission reads, you “serve at the pleasure of the president.” This means that you must have a passion for anonymity – your successes are your leader’s successes. That speech you just spent two months writing? To the outside world, it was your party’s speech. Yet if you make a blunder, it will be considered your mistake. So what makes it worthwhile?

For some it may be the allure of power; for others a lust for competition and success. But for most, it is a compelling sense of duty. You are now part of a team that shares the same beliefs, and wants to make this country a better place. Furthermore, you believe in the leader of your party. You work in the most powerful building in the world (or hope to after the next election), just steps away from the office where President John F. Kennedy prevented nuclear war, Richard Nixon spoke to a man on the moon, and George W. Bush comforted the nation after the September 11th tragedy.

In the words of former White House Chief of Staff and current Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, “You are a servant of the American people. Do it well.”

**Bibliography**

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