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Obama's Chief of Staff Will Be the Most Important Appointment of His Term

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.
January 14, 2013

For many practical purposes, it is the White House operations boss -- and not the vice president -- who serves as the nation's deputy president.



Outgoing Chief of Staff Jack Lew with Obama in March 2012 (Larry Downing/Reuters)

President Obama will soon make what could be the most important appointment of his second term: his chief of staff.

His choice will not have to be confirmed by the Senate or testify on Capitol Hill, and is not given nearly as much attention as controversial or high-visibility nominations to the Cabinet or to critical agencies, as is clearly the case right now with Defense ([Chuck Hagel](#)) and the CIA ([John Brennan](#)) -- or even [Jack Lew, the current chief of staff and Obama's nominee for Treasury secretary](#). This is so because chiefs of staff often (though not always) try to operate out of the glare of the media spotlight, and are often summarily described in the media as the West Wing "gatekeeper."

But given the fragmented nature of the federal government, the right chief of staff must effectively function as deputy president.

Watching what the White House chief of staff actually *does* is critical to an understanding of how the president leads. In the vast executive branch, only the chief of staff and the vice president have the same broad view of the total policy and political world as the president himself. But the chief of staff has a core operational role, while the vice president has, generally, had only a senior advisory one (with an occasional special project).

Here are key reasons why the chief of staff's role has such potential importance in the modern era.

- The vast majority of executive-branch decisions require the views of multiple federal departments and agencies. Sharp differences -- which are inevitable -- need to be resolved at the center, in the White House. These differences often reflect fundamental underlying debates: social equity vs. economic growth, international idealism vs. global realism.
- A president can have only five to 10 top priorities on which he makes virtually all decisions. He can set general direction for perhaps 25 secondary priorities. But on those 25 issues and on the vast array of other "sub-presidential" decisions, over which departments and agencies often fight like cats and dogs, the chief of staff must make the "presidential" call or oversee the White House office responsible for forging an unwieldy consensus, for instance the Office of Management and Budget or the National Security Council.
- The lines between "foreign" and "domestic" issues are not sharply drawn today but overlap, requiring the president or the chief of staff to resolve disagreements among the highest-ranking officials in the government. To take a salient example, the U.S. posture toward China on any single issue obviously requires integration of economic, diplomatic, and military perspectives -- some requiring the president's detailed attention, but others coordinated or decided in the president's name by the chief of staff.
- The essence of presidential leadership is joining policy (where the administration wants to go) and politics (how it shapes a consensus to get there). This involves reconciling the different views on policy and politics of all the major actors in the political system -- from the Congress to state and local governments to the great swarm of interest groups to the fragmented old and new media -- who have their own connections and influence with various parts of the executive branch. In an era of partisan rancor, a capacious view of national politics and how to make it serve policy is especially critical. The chief of staff must pull the skein of policy and political threads together into an overarching four-year strategy.

- The chief staff person in the White House -- the chief of staff -- has to establish understandings on who will run decision *processes*, who will *advise*, and who will *decide* on the vast array of priorities short of the president himself. These "rules of the game," which every administration has to establish for itself, are not the stuff of sexy feature stories. But without them presidencies can fall all over themselves and ultimately implode.

In short, although department, agency, and executive-branch offices claim that they operate with "presidential perspective," they don't. They have their own bureaucratic views of that "perspective." Only the people who sit above these contending fiefdoms can coordinate them and, as necessary, decide. Historically, this has meant the president and the chief of staff.

This is why the chief of staff must, if he or she has the right set of skills, function as deputy president. But, of course, the White House never describes the job that way, because to do so would diminish the power and authority of the president himself.

And that is why, in most instances, the chiefs of staff try to lay low in the media. When a president like Ronald Reagan wants to focus on a few "big things" and delegate, chiefs of staff like Jim Baker or Don Regan became major public figures. The same can be said for the rare vice president, like Dick Cheney, who was given the authority of deputy president by George Bush (no one remembers that Cheney was chief of staff to President Gerald Ford). More often, the vice president, like Joe Biden, is the senior adviser and occasional troubleshooter for the president -- but not a major day-to-day coordinator/decider at the center of an administration's astounding flow of business.

Indeed, the fictional chiefs of staff during the 1999-2006 run of the TV series *West Wing*, Leo McGarry and later C.J. Cregg, were probably better known to the American public than the actual chiefs of staffs at the time (John Podesta and Andrew Card).

Now that Lew has been nominated for Treasury secretary, Obama is reported to be considering for his new chief of staff either Denis McDonough, the deputy national security adviser, or Ron Klain, the former chief of staff to Vice Presidents Gore and Biden. Whoever he chooses will get several days of headlines and biographical news features, and then fade from view as issues and out-front officials dominate the news. But if either man -- or someone else the president chooses -- has the breadth of policy and political skills, the drive, and the knowledge to stand astride the most complicated organization in the world, and a close personal relationship to Obama himself, he will function as deputy president. He will need to if the administration is to succeed.

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