

# Managing Power:

## *George H.W. Bush's White House*

PRESENTED BY  
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# Introduction:

On the evening of January 30th, 2023, former senior White House officials gathered to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the George Bush School of Government and Public Service and the presidency of George H.W. Bush. Professor Andrew S. Natsios, director of the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs, oversaw the panel of former White House staff members John H. Sununu, Chase Untermeyer, Andrew H. Card Jr., Fred McClure, Jim Cicconi, David Q. Bates Jr., and Professor Roger B. Porter. This transcript paints a vivid picture on the inner workings of President Bush's White House through insightful stories. We at the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs have preserved the atmosphere and tone of the original event with minor edits for clarity.

While President George H.W. Bush is perhaps best known for his foreign policy achievements, his domestic accomplishments deserve their due credit and attention. They were numerous, bipartisan, and effective. Former Chief of Staff John H. Sununu summarized these achievements well. "From the Clean Air Act to the Americans with Disabilities Act," Sununu recounted, "from the 1991 Civil Rights Act to the Budget Control Act (which really generated the surpluses that Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich liked to take credit for), these are really George Herbert Walker Bush surpluses. Certainly, the Energy Policy Act really set the foundation for America becoming energy independent." Rather than simply recounting the history behind every one of these legislative achievements, this anniversary event focused on the leadership Bush exercised, his governing style, and his fostering of a professional culture in his White House that made these achievements possible.

We at the Scowcroft Institute hope historians, students, and those interested in presidential history enjoy this insightful collection of personal stories about the inner workings of President George H.W. Bush's White House.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

*Former Assistant Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development*

Good evening.

I'm Andrew Natsios, the director of the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs here at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, and I'd like to welcome you all this evening to our special event, part of the 25th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Bush School. We are happy to present new perspectives on the George H.W. Bush presidency from former senior White House staff.

Just before we begin, I'd like to introduce our dean, Mark Welsh. Dean Welsh, thank you for coming.

Here's the order for our event tonight: We have four people speaking virtually and three people speaking in person.

The idea of tonight's event is not just for us to be educated on how things were run in the White House, I thought it also might be interesting and useful to transcribe what you all say this evening.

Our first speaker is **John Sununu**. Governor Sununu was the 75th governor of New Hampshire from 1983 to 1989, holding office for three successive terms. From 1989 to 1991, John was the first White House chief of staff for President George H.W. Bush. He remained at the White House as counselor to the president until 1992.

Thank you, John.

**John H. Sununu:**

*White House Chief of Staff*

Thank you, Andrew.

It is a pleasure to be part of this evening. Looking back at a presidency that all of us are going to speak about tonight, we certainly are very honored to have been part of the presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush. What I thought I would try to do tonight was explain a little bit about why I think there's something very special about this one-term presidency.

First, I think it's important for us to remember that coming into office, George Herbert Walker Bush was somewhat unique. He was a vice president elected to succeed the president he served as vice president, and that has not happened any other time in modern history. It happened a couple of times, once or twice in the olden days so to speak, but Bush was a vice president immediately following his president, and George Bush (because of that timing) had a very clear vision of what he wanted to accomplish and a very good idea of how he was going to do it.

He came into office with a well-defined agenda. He came into office with an understanding of the kind of White House he wanted to have, and he knew what he wanted to accomplish. Even though he didn't know that he was only going to be a one-term president, he was truly determined, I think, to get as much of it done as possible in those first four years. President Bush was smart enough to understand that to succeed beyond an agenda you need a team, and beyond a team, you need a *process* under which that team will operate.

From the time when he was elected on November 8th, 1988, until inauguration day, the process was one of working to sharply define and communicate his agenda. He worked to make sure that the White House would run better than the White Houses he had experience with, and he kept that in mind when making the selection of his top team. On November 17th, he named me as the chief of staff. Then, he named Baker as secretary of state, and Scowcroft as the head of the National Security Council. On December 26th, he gave me a handwritten copy—15 pages—of the issues that he thought he wanted to address and help solve. He even typed that up into about a triple-spaced, 14 or 15-page memo that he then gave to everyone at the very first cabinet meeting on January 23rd, 1989.

His first meeting wasted no time. He talked about dealing with issues such as the budget, the environment, energy, education, immigration, crime, and welfare reform. He talked about America's role in international leadership, and how that had to be focused and enhanced. He talked about how he was going to deal with Europe on issues like arms control, Central America, and China. *That* was his detailed agenda, and under each one of those headings, he listed the specific items that he wanted to address, and how he wanted us to focus on them.

In putting the team together, he gave me some leeway. I would come to him during this transition period with my recommendations as to who should fill the key slots. I think with only one or two exceptions, he showed enough confidence in my recommendations that it's what the team ended up being. And tonight, the audience will hear from some of the key people that were so critical in putting together the results of what I think is probably the most successful one-term presidency. Frankly, in terms of what it produced both in foreign policy and domestic policy, I think even in one term, President George H.W. Bush deserves credit for being way up there on the list of successful presidents.

A point that I often try to stress is that George Bush passed more impactful domestic legislation than any president, except perhaps Lyndon Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt, but probably because he is known as primarily a foreign policy president, the academic community hasn't looked at how successful his domestic policy packages were. From the Clean Air Act to the Americans with Disabilities Act, from the 1991 Civil Rights Act to the Budget Control Act (which really generated the surpluses that Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich liked to take credit for), these are really George Herbert Walker Bush surpluses. Certainly, the Energy Policy Act really set the foundation for America becoming energy independent.

Let me talk a little bit about the day-to-day operations in the White House. When Bush and I discussed how he wanted the White House to run, I think the focus of what the president emphasized was that he wanted a tone of collegiality within the White House. So, we tried very hard to create a system in which the team got to work with each other, rather than either in isolation (or as it happens in some White Houses) not in concert at all.

Two key meetings dealt with that but let me give you all an idea of how the White House ran on a general timeline. First: I would get to the White House about 6:00 a.m. or 6:15 a.m. Andy Card usually beat me there by a half hour, and we would chat a little bit about what came in overnight (memos, news stories, or whatever it was) to get an idea of what the day would look like. At about 7:15 a.m., I had an open-door policy, which I thought was important for the staff to know that if any of them in the White House felt they had to come in and chat with the chief of staff, they could come in and talk. If there was something I had to take to the president for them (if they felt they hadn't been able to see the president), then at least they would feel there was a short pipeline for them to communicate up to the president.

The most important meeting of the day was in the evening, where me as chief of staff, Brent Scowcroft as head of the National Security Council, and Dan Quayle as vice president would all meet with the president. It would start with a CIA briefing. Scowcroft then would spend about an hour talking about all the foreign policy stuff that had happened overnight, and what would be happening that day. I would talk for about half an hour on the domestic side, what was happening with Congress. And then we would have about a 40 minute back and forth amongst the four of us on wherever the president wanted to move the conversation. And frankly, it was in those two meetings that I think the tone, the communication, and the capacity to perform was defined in the George H.W. Bush White House.

The second most important meeting of the day was earlier at 7:30 a.m., which was the staff meeting. As Andy, Roger, Jim, and I were chatting here a little bit before we started this evening, it was a fairly freewheeling meeting with about 20 plus staff members, the senior staff of the White House. We would come in, and in a short 30 seconds to a minute, everybody would talk about what under their purview was going to happen that day. The most important thing about those meetings was not only the serious communication that took place, but frankly the informal communication and chatting that went back and forth from the folks that were there. I think it created a *camaraderie* that served the president and the country well in the long run.

So, in terms of accomplishing his agenda, in terms of the president gathering his team, in terms of the process that took advantage of that collegiality, the Bush White House provided the president with a collegial staff that took the agenda he laid out and successfully moved it forward. The Bush White House policy process was very effective in communicating those policies to the Congress and the public and then getting things put together and finished. George Bush was a one-term president, but he was a great president with a long-lasting impact, and I'm really happy that tonight we're taking a look-back at what he accomplished and how his White House helped in that process.

Thank you, Andrew.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Thank you, John.

Next, we would like to welcome Chase Untermeyer to the stage. Chase is the former U.S. ambassador to Qatar. He served in the Texas House of Representatives before serving as the

executive assistant to then Vice President George H.W. Bush from 1981 to 1983. Chase was later named assistant to the president and director of the White House personnel office under President Bush from 1989 to 1991.

Chase?

### **Chase Untermeyer:**

*Assistant to the President, Director of the White House Office of Presidential Personnel*

I have often said that anyone who has headed the White House Office of Presidential Personnel never wants to do it again but can never stop talking about it [audience laughs]. It was a brutal, often searing experience, but it was also *fascinating* – a super-graduate-level course in U.S. government. By filling jobs, my staff and I got to know every corner of the federal establishment. Filling high level positions is a core presidential power. In the Constitution, roughly one-third of all the words describe what a president does as being devoted to the appointment process. I also learned a great deal of the peculiar psychology of those who want federal jobs and those who want to keep them out of those jobs. This involves the rawer human emotions of greed, envy, hatred, revenge, and ingratitude.

Take the time President Bush asked me to find “something good” to give one of his old Navy buddies. I found something good, the American Battle Monuments Commission, and called the man with what I thought would be good news. I described the work of the commission and said, “Best of all, you get a free trip to Europe once a year.” There was a pause on the line, after which the man asked, “Is there something that goes to Europe more often?” Irritated, I said, “Yes – *American Airlines*” [audience laughs].

There is an old line, “Every time I make an appointment, I earn nine enemies and one ingrate.” I have seen this quotation attributed to President Taft and to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia of New York. Once I used it in an interview with *Newsweek*, and they attributed it to *me*.

No president, starting with George Washington, has liked making appointments. It means saying no to longtime supporters and (for unavoidable political reasons) even giving jobs to the undeserving former foes. I believe a prime reason I had such strong support from White House Chief of Staff John Sununu is that he had been governor of New Hampshire for six years making hundreds of appointments. Now, there is a great difference in scale between the Granite State and the entire United States, but I’ll bet the political headaches were the same.

The Reagan-to-Bush transition was the first time in 60 years that a president succeeded someone of his own party without a death or resignation. The prior time was the Coolidge-to-Hoover transition of 1928, when the federal government was so much smaller. Because of this, my experience was of particular interest to the transition planners for Hillary Clinton in 2016. I don’t plan to say any more about my time in Presidential Personnel. If you’re at all curious, there are 300 pages of such tales in *Zenith*, my book about the first Bush administration, read by dozens of people throughout America [audience laughs].

But I will assert that the Reagan Administration model of running Presidential Personnel, subsequently embraced by the two Bush administrations, is the best for dealing with the tough task of filling the appointed ranks of a government. This meant that a Presidential Personnel Office was headed by an assistant to the president with an office in the West Wing, a person who reported directly to the Chief of Staff and occasionally to the president. The director is assisted by a staff who have been political appointees themselves, each with responsibility in certain broad functional areas like National Security or Natural Resources.

The ideal head of Presidential Personnel is someone known to have a close connection with the president, who enjoys his full support and can speak and act with authority. Two excellent examples of this were Bob Tuttle (son of Holmes Tuttle, an original Reagan supporter in California) and Clay Johnson (a prep school roommate of George W. Bush and head of his personnel office as Governor of Texas).

This becomes important when, as frequently happens, the personnel director must face down his or her natural enemy—the Cabinet officer—in disputes over positions in their departments. Such officers speak of “my appointments,” as if these jobs (like under and assistant secretaries) are theirs to fill, with the president acting as a mere clerk, dumbly approving those choices [audience laughs]. Every time I heard that phrase “my appointments,” I wanted to scrub secretarial mouths out with soap [audience laughs].

60 years ago, it took John F. Kennedy only two months to nominate the principal officers of his administration. Now it takes a year or longer. There are three major reasons for this: first, the growth of the federal bureaucracy and the parallel growth of presidential appointments. Second, the lengthening of the personal background and financial disclosure forms that every prospective nominee must fill out, and third, the Senate confirmation process. Both the Trump and Biden administrations prioritized the confirmation of judges over all other nominees, and with the Senate meeting only a few days a week, majority leaders have brought judicial nominations to the floor for consideration, not those for assistant secretaries, ambassadors, regulatory commissioners, and the rest.

There were special problems with presidential appointments during the Trump Administration. First of all, he should have put in charge of Presidential Personnel whoever handled HR [human resources] for his company in New York. That person might not have known much about the federal government at the outset, but he or she could have spoken with absolute authority for President Trump. Instead, Trump chose a former Jeb Bush supporter named Bill Hagerty, who had been a successful businessman and a senior appointee in the Tennessee state government. Hagerty had impressive credentials, but he was the man with a plan: He stayed in Presidential Personnel only long enough to grab the ambassadorship to Japan for himself, and he stayed in Tokyo only until a U.S. Senate seat opened back home [audience laughs]. Today he is the junior senator from Tennessee. One can admire Mr. Hagerty’s hustle, which brought good things to himself, and we presume to Tennessee [audience laughs]. But he did not serve his president well.

Next, Trump chose another person outside his New York world, John de Stefano, an aide to former Speaker of the House John Boehner. De Stefano proved one of the few very able members of the Trump White House staff, so much so that he was given the added responsibilities of running the Political Affairs and Public Liaison offices. This meant he had to



devote less time to personnel. Then, Trump had a series of junior people in Presidential Personnel, ending with a political operative named John McEntee, who spent the fourth year of the Trump presidency *removing*, not proposing, appointees.

Aside from the people he picked to work in Presidential Personnel, Trump made two other major errors with regard to appointments: The first was he never attempted to fill the federal establishment with his supporters. A president's appointees are his mandate made flesh-and-blood. Trump felt he had a mandate to "drain the swamp" in Washington, but he never put enough swamp-drainers onto the task. This meant that those whom he and his supporters denounced as the "deep state" (meaning civil servants) ran many key parts of the federal government during his administration, not true-believing Trumpists. He also thought he had more control over those he put in jobs in an "acting" capacity rather than those who had received Senate confirmation. This was entirely wrong. For one thing, a president can remove whomever he wants whenever he wants for whatever reason he wants, be that person "acting" or fully confirmed. Meanwhile, the "acting" appointees lacked complete authority to carry out the president's wishes.

As I warned, it is hard to talk about Presidential Personnel briefly or dispassionately. It is a tough job, and in telling you about it I was not seeking pity. After all, I was rewarded for my efforts with a presidential appointment of my own, as well as by something President Bush said in 2012 when historian Mark Updegrove asked the president, "What is your proudest accomplishment in public life?" President Bush could have mentioned his naval service during World War II, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ouster of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, or the reunification of Germany. Instead, he said this:

"I think we had an honorable administration. I think we were relatively scandal-free and blessed by a lot of good people – getting a lot of good people involved."

I can't take credit for all those good people. Still, his words were soul-satisfying.

### **Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Thank you, Chase.

Our next speaker is **Andrew H. Card**. Andy served as the deputy chief of staff in the Bush 41 White House, and then he served as the chief of staff to President George W. Bush, "43" (as we call him) from January 2001 to April 2006. Andy also served as secretary of transportation in the Bush 41 White House. He's served three presidents: President Reagan, President Bush 41, and President Bush 43. So, he comes here tonight with a remarkable history.

What you all may not know is that the two of us were elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives the same year in 1974. So, we've known each other for nearly 50 years. Andy?

**Andrew H. Card, Jr.**

*Secretary of Transportation, Deputy Chief of Staff*

Thank you very much, Andrew. It's an honor to be with you and the folks at Texas A&M. So, I will do as Chase did and say howdy!

**Audience:**

*Howdy!*

**Andrew H. Card Jr.**

I'm pleased to be a part of this discussion, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to be with John Sununu, Roger Porter, and Jim Cicconi.

I'll start off by saying President George *H.W.* Bush. Remember, when we all worked for him, the president didn't use the *H.W.*, he was George Bush. When we all served George Bush in his first term, and that term made quite a difference, it was a *remarkable* experience because of the ethics and commitment that he brought to office, and he was contagious in his desire for us all to always do the right thing.

On January 12, before the president took the Oath of Office, George H.W. Bush sent marching orders out to everybody:

"Think big, challenge the system, adhere to the highest ethical standards, be on the record as much as possible. When I make the call, we move as a team, work with Congress, and represent the United States of America with dignity."

He sent that message to everybody currently on staff working in Presidential Personnel, even those who had been working on the campaign. He sent it to all of us who were helping him build an administration that would make a difference. I can say that George H.W. Bush's commitment was truly infectious. Everyone here tonight that had the privilege of serving with him certainly lived up to the marching orders that he gave us, and we are all proud of that.

George H.W. Bush also did something else: As Governor Sununu said, the president came into office *fully* prepared to be the president because he knew what it meant to work in government. He had been vice president. He'd been director of the C.I.A. He'd been de facto ambassador to China, the first envoy to China. He'd been chairman of the Republican Party. George H.W. Bush knew what it meant to lead organizations. He knew what it meant to understand the burden of someone who works in the White House, and he empathized with those working in government to help make a difference. The president also knew that while the White House makes a lot of decisions, it doesn't get to implement very many of them – that is done by the departments and agencies.

In general, most of a president's policies happen because presidential decisions are implemented by both the career employees and the political appointees (at government agency departments).

So, George H.W. Bush had great empathy for the working nature of government to live up to the expectations of a president, but more importantly, to the high standards that the American people would expect. So, I was proud to do that. He also came to office knowing that people make a difference, and Governor Sununu was appropriate in describing how he helped the president build an administration of people that would make a difference.

Chase [Sununu] led the effort to help screen, nominate, and suggest people who should be nominated for positions. That was critically important; good people make a difference. The president was fortunate that some of the people who had worked for President Ronald Reagan came to work for him, especially near the end of Reagan's presidency. For example, Jim Baker resigned as secretary of the treasury to help President Bush run successfully for the Presidency. Jim Baker was succeeded at treasury by someone that George Bush knew very well: Nick Brady, who he had recommended for the position. So that was a very big deal, and Nick Brady made a difference as the secretary of the treasury for Ronald Reagan, and he continued in that position for George H.W. Bush. So, that was a significant, easy way to say: "We are going to work together. This is not us doing something necessarily different than Ronald Reagan. It's continuing to do what's best for the country and to make a difference."

Dick Thornburgh was in the same situation. He had just been named attorney general not that long before George Bush was elected president, and he continued to serve in that position under George Bush when he had been appointed by Ronald Reagan. Then, Lauro Cavazos, the secretary of education at the time, had been appointed near the end of the Reagan administration, and he continued to serve as secretary of education under George Bush early on

The point here is that President Bush came to office *already understanding* what it's like to be president. His learning curve was not steep, it was not high. He was *well grounded*, and he encouraged us to be well grounded in what we did and to have the courage to speak truth to power.

I'm a witness of the phenomenal ability of John Sununu to speak truth to power. He was very, *very* good at making sure that the president was given really good counsel that was not monolithic. It wasn't that George Bush just echoed the views of people in the White House. George Bush made decisions after having been well-informed by a diverse group of people in the White House, who had the courage to speak up, and Jim Cicconi was certainly a huge part of that. Jim had the great burden of making sure that every document that went into the Oval Office *came out* of the Oval Office, went into the public records, and stayed there. So, he was like the policeman for making sure that nobody could end run the system.

Roger Porter was the first person working in the West Wing of the White House who had the responsibility for both domestic and economic policy. He put together a wonderful team. So, this group here tonight really helped the president do an awful lot of work from the start that other presidents wouldn't have been prepared to do for *months*. George Bush was prepared to do them literally on day one. I also want to give a shout out to someone who's no longer with us, Dick Darman, (who played a huge role in that process as the Office of Management and Budget

director), as well as to the senior staff and Governor Sununu. The morning staff meetings were, number one, enjoyable. Number two, they were filled with respect. And number three, they produced results that were not monolithically developed.

So, I'll say that I was *privileged* to be with George H.W. Bush for the entire tenure of his Presidency (first as deputy chief of staff, then as secretary of transportation). I was sorry that it was only one year I was one of those people in the Cabinet. Yes, I wanted him to be reelected, but the way in which George H.W. Bush left the Presidency was a model for other presidential transitions. I was *mightily* impressed with how he organized a transition that helped Bill Clinton become president without having to climb a steep learning curve. George Bush did a remarkable job with that.

I want to close this talk with one story that I have:

On January 6, 1993, George H.W. Bush invited the chairman of the joint chiefs, the members of the joint chiefs' chiefs of staff, and all of their spouses to Camp David. He invited all of the Supreme Court justices and their spouses to Camp David. He invited me and my wife while I was running the transition. Even George Strait, that great country western singer, was there and with his family. President Bush had been called out to deal with a problem with Saddam Hussein.

So, we were all waiting in the chapel for service, and then George Strait broke into, "*All my exes live in Texas*," and it was a bizarre experience [audience laughs]. But I was vitally impressed that President Bush was demonstrating the respect for the institutions of government that are so critical, the Supreme Court, our military leaders, and the rest of the executive branch of government. I will never forget that.

So, with that, thank you for including me.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Thank you, Andy.

Our next speaker is **Fred McClure**. Fred is the associate vice president for leadership and engagement at Texas A&M University. He served as the assistant for legislative affairs to President George H.W. Bush and special assistant for legislative affairs to President Ronald Reagan. In 1995, Governor George W. Bush appointed Fred to the Texas A&M University system Board of Regents where he served as the vice chairman.

Fred?

**Fred McClure:**

*Assistant for Legislative Affairs*

Howdy!

**Crowd:**

*Howdy!*

**Fred McClure:**

Thank you, Andrew.

It's a distinct pleasure to have the opportunity to visit with you this evening on this distinguished panel and reflect upon the duties that I was charged with as assistant to the president for legislative affairs. I'll go back, however, to when I first met George Bush in Austin, Texas.

It was on January 16th, 1979, on Congress Avenue in downtown Austin, Bill Clements' inauguration day as state governor. At the time, I was working for our senator from Texas, John Tower, and we were walking back from the swearing in ceremony. Suddenly, Senator Tower turns to me and says, "Fred, have you ever met Ambassador Bush?"

I said, "No, I haven't."

He goes, "Well, you are right now." [audience laughs].

He grabbed then Ambassador Bush, and we met there on the street on Congress Avenue in Austin, Texas. Almost exactly 10 years later I had the opportunity on January 20, 1989, to join him as a member of the senior staff, and these guys and gals that I had the privilege of working with. So that part of my opportunity stems back to that fateful day.

Before I get into my experience, I'll tell you all a little about the history of my job at the White House: The office was created in 1954 because President Eisenhower had an awakening after his midterm elections. Suddenly, the Congress of the United States was not of the same political persuasion as he. So, the Office of Legislative Affairs was created. First run by Bryce Harlow, it was described as a way of having a low-key approach to communicating the president's views to members of Congress.

There's a very high turnover rate for the job of assistant to the president for legislative affairs. Only one person has ever held it for an entire term of a presidency. Frank Moore, who served under President Carter, did just that. I have the second longest term; I lasted three years and three weeks. I think the reason for this high turnover is because it's much like the press secretary. You end up being in a position where you have two masters and you're communicating the views of the president to Congress, but Congress also wants you to communicate their views back to the president. All 535 of them wake up each morning thinking they should be president [audience laughs].

The Office of Legislative Affairs was structured going back to the Nixon days. The Nixon White House, the Ford White House, the Reagan White House, and the Bush White House were all structured in the same fashion. There were people who served throughout or in a couple of those, so you might have somebody who had worked in the Nixon days, but they also

helped with President Ford because of that transition. And some of those people came back to help with President Reagan.

But the organizational structure was designed in much the same way, and like it's been alluded to earlier, we had some holdovers because you couldn't get all 15 people or 20 people all on board all at once. It was not a hostile takeover between the Reagan and the Bush administrations. We had some folks that hung on for a few days to help us bide time because Congress was going to start working anyway. We needed all the people that we could get. With Governor Sununu (I think probably some of this comes from the fact that he comes from New Hampshire), we started with an austerity move, which the governor may remember. I'm sure my old colleagues remember in terms of what staffing was going to be like.

I do remember, though, the advice I got from one distinguished staffer who worked for Nixon and Ford. He said to me:

"Fred, just remember this: because part of our job is counting votes, we're trying to figure out how we can get to 51 or 60 or 67 as the case may be in the Senate, or 218 or 290, depending upon the circumstances, in the House of Representatives."

And then this dear friend, whom I'd known for all these years, goes:

"McClure, you got this job now, but just remember this: *they all lie* [audience laughs]. As long as you remember that you'll be okay, and you'll be able to figure it out."

In other words, I ended up with one fewer person than we had had on each side lobbying the Congress for the House and for the Senate than we had during my days with President Reagan. With one exception, all the people we had (the three deputy assistants to the president and the five special assistants to the president) all worked together either on the Hill or in the private sector, and they were people that I knew and knew well. And that one member of the team that fell out of that characterization came with the highest of recommendations.

We were able to put together, I think, a pretty good team to represent the president. My rule of thumb, my underlying principle, is no surprises. No surprises to make sure that everything that was on the table needed to be there as we were going down the path of trying to get legislation enacted or legislation stopped that the president did not want.

And in turn, the deal was also, "I will be loyal to *you*, and I expect that loyalty to work both ways." There were times where people on my staff took one position and members of Congress took another position as to what happened in a particular exchange, and it was important for my team's members to know that I had their backs.

Every week, we had staff meetings that also included legislative folks from OMB (Office of Management and Budget) and other folks from the National Security Council. Those meetings allowed us to talk about what activities we had down the road. I also divided up and structured the team into their areas of subject matter expertise. So, for example, if it was something to do with the American with Disabilities Act, then a person in the House team and a person in the Senate team were each charged with that responsibility. They, in turn, worked with Roger Porter's group at the Domestic Policy Council from the standpoint of knowing what issues were on the table and who we were dealing with.

We also had a thing that we jokingly called “white towel” duty. White towel duty basically meant that when members of Congress came to the White House to see the president or to be involved in any meeting, like congressional meetings with the president, we had to do the white towel duty. In other words, put the white towel over your arm and be there to make sure the members of Congress felt as though they were welcome. It also allowed us to get some face-to-face time with them because that was what we cherished most of all.

I remember the day that Senator Strom Thurmond, at the age of 90, got down and showed me how he did pushups [audience laughs]. He just did it *right there* in the reception room, right outside the cabinet room, which was quite a sight.

I tried to make sure that these staff members were involved in those meetings so that the members of Congress would realize that when they were talking to one of the deputies or special assistants that they were talking to people who were “go-to” folks on our team. And, in turn, we worked with the political affairs folks when members of Congress were traveling with the president on Air Force One. We worked with them to make sure that we could cover all the bases.

The president and Governor Sununu made a commitment to me. This gets a little bit into Chase's space, but the assistant secretaries of legislative affairs would have my blessing now and again. Fortunately, I only had to pull that card one time once. The White House backed me up. My logic was that if these are the people who are going to be promoting the president's legislative program before Congress on behalf of cabinet agencies, we want to make sure that they have the loyalty level not to their cabinet secretary, but to the broader cause of what the president wanted to accomplish in his agenda. And those were the kinds of people that we wanted there.

We had a weekly legislative report we sent to the president, including what went on that week, what we expected next week, and who was going to be on Capitol Hill testifying. It also included what we expected down the road, what big vote hurdles we were going to have. Finally, it had information about what a sampling of members of Congress were writing about, because my office also handled all correspondence with members of Congress. A lot of time, members of Congress would write to the president, and they would get a letter back from me, which I know they thought was really cool [audience laughs]. In fact, it almost got me in trouble at one point because my office accidentally responded to some members on an issue from which I was recused.

But all in all, I think we put together a group that allowed us to communicate in a lowkey way the views of the president to the Congress of the United States. We often had to do things by the threat—or the president's use—of the veto. In fact, we did this a lot, since we never had control of either House of Congress during Bush's presidency. We had 23 of them during my tenure, and none of those 23 were overridden. I left the White House, and he got overridden but not my fault.

I think that probably the best descriptor of what the job was like was when Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth came for a state visit in May of '91. The entire senior staff was invited to go and meet the Queen and Prince Philip. So, we all get there, and standing there are the Queen, the president, Prince Philip, and Mrs. Bush. I'm worried about whether I'm supposed to curtsy, grab

her hand, or bow. I'm just wanting to get through it without a major faux pas. When I get to Mrs. Bush, she turns to Prince Philip and says,

"Prince Philip, meet Fred McClure: He handles my husband's relations with Congress."

I get it right with Prince Philip and don't blow it.

Then, he looks at me and he says, "And you must be the *spear catcher*." [audience laughs.] That, I think, was the best description of my job as assistant for legislative affairs, or rather maybe sometimes more like a ping pong ball [audience laughs].

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Thank you, Fred.

Next up is Jim Cicconi. Jim served as the assistant to President Bush and as staff secretary in the White House from 1989 to 1990. Prior to those roles, he served as special assistant to President Bush, and as special assistant to the chief of staff during the Reagan presidency from 1981 to 1985 under Jim Baker.

Jim?

**Jim Cicconi:**

*Assistant to the President and White House Staff Secretary*

Thank you, Andrew.

I'll start by describing the history of my old job a little bit.

In effect, you're the president's inbox and outbox; that was really my function. I got to say no almost as many times as Chase Untermeyer. It's also an old job. It originated under Lincoln. Ever since Lincoln, there's been one or two people with the title of secretary to the president. For a long time, it was called that because it was meant to help the president with his paperwork.

As Andy and Governor Sununu described, President Bush felt very strongly about having a process with *integrity*. He had worked in government, as you know, for quite a long time. By the time of his presidency, he had been vice president for eight years. It wasn't until Walter Mondale, his predecessor, that vice presidents were in the White House's paper flow. Bush continued that precedent, instructing me to ensure that Vice President Quale was also kept in the loop.

So, George Bush came to the presidency not only well prepared, but very well versed in how a White House should function and the importance of having an internal process with integrity. He was also well-versed in all the issues going on in the government from his previous eight years as vice president. I think that served us well in getting off to a very good start.



President Bush knew how a White House operates and, more importantly, he had well-formed ideas about how he wanted his White House to run.

Some weeks after the election, Governor Sununu called me. He told me that the president-elect wanted to meet with me the next morning, so I went in there and spent a half hour or more with him, just he and I, with him describing to me not only the job he wanted me to do, but how he wanted me to do it. I recall that he kept coming back to that word, *integrity*. My job was to ensure that I was on top of all the foreign and domestic issues, including national security issues flowing through the White House (or headed toward the White House from the different departments and agencies), making sure that when whatever issue went to the president, they were always ready for his review and decision.

When an issue did finally get up through the chain and to the president, he wanted me to make sure that he had all of the views of his senior team in the White House. With David Bates' help, the president instructed me to have the relevant members of his cabinet in the loop. Sometimes the president convened a meeting to hear others' views directly or to ask questions. Often, he'd pick up the phone to talk to people who had views on an issue before he made a decision.

So, when President Bush made his final decision, it was always very well informed – he had the views of everyone on his senior team. Then it was my job to carry it through. President Bush had been in and around government long enough to know that just because the president makes a decision doesn't mean it's actually carried out. And I see Fred smiling there [audience laughs]. I think all of us have been through this and understand that bureaucratic inertia can often be a real problem.

President Bush once told me that for any decision he made on a key issue, he always kept an open checkbox in his mind, and that he needed me to tell him when his decision was implemented. That way, he could check the box and close that file in his brain. On a daily basis, I had to interact with almost everybody on the staff—especially with then Chief of Staff Governor Sununu and also with Andy Card—in making sure we were tracking his decisions, making sure who knew about their responsibilities. Finally, we would report back to the president when it was done.

But most importantly, the president himself felt so strongly about that decision making process that if somebody was in a meeting with him and handed him a piece of paper, he'd take it very graciously, but he wouldn't look at it. He'd send it to me, and I'd run it through my staff to make sure that before he formed an opinion on it he had the advice of all of his top people.

I think Governor Sununu made the point that we all knew each other before President Bush was sworn in. I first met Governor Sununu when I was practicing law and dealing with nuclear regulatory issues that affected New Hampshire, but we also worked together in the 1988 campaign. I'd worked closely with Andy, Fred, Roger, and all the others on the team from Reagan's White House, where some of us worked for Vice President Bush. So altogether, the entire team was *very* well integrated when it came time for President Bush's White House.

I also know the Scowcroft Institute is very well versed in how important the collegiality and friendships were between all the senior staff members (Bush, Baker, Scowcroft, Cheney, and

Powell) in ensuring a smoothly functioning national security team. The fact that they had worked together through several administrations over the years and become friends... I think everybody understands how *crucial* that was to the foreign policy successes of the Bush administration. I think that was equally true in terms of the collegiality of the senior White House staff as John and Andy described tonight.

*We all knew each other.* We had worked together for years. We had gotten to be friends and we all knew President Bush. Maybe even more important than that is that President Bush knew *us*. He had been around us. He saw us working during the Reagan White House. President Bush had worked with some of us on his campaign too, and he knew some of us from his prior jobs. So, he knew *everybody* on the senior team well. He knew our talents, and if we had shortcomings, he knew that too, and I think he and John did a great job of placing us all in positions, with a process, that kept us all working closely together. There were senior staff meetings, but we also had hallway conversations, and other informal things like that. This *wasn't* a place with rivalries or back biting or any other things of that nature among the staff.

I think that kind of camaraderie was one of the big reasons that we were all able to hit the ground running, and we had to do it. In 1989, when we were going through the transition, we were in the midst of the savings and loan crisis, which a lot of people forget about, but that was a *major*, systemic threat to the financial system as a whole. It had to be dealt with, and it was one of the first big problems we faced, and I can't talk about that without mentioning one of the unsung heroes of the crisis: Richard Breeden. George Bush asked him to take responsibility for it, put a team together, and to put legislation together to solve the crisis.

Later that same year, we were able to craft and pass the Financial Institutions Recovery Act. I think that bill helped save the financial system from a major fiscal crisis. I don't think we would've been able to save the system without George Bush's knowledge of those issues from his time as vice president, his ability to focus on what were the two or three most important issues at any given moment. He had a talent for getting the right people in place, delegating responsibility to them, and staying on top of it himself. Then, the president ensured that everyone else had all of the support that he could provide them to bear on the task. I think that crisis was one example where President Bush doesn't get the credit he should. It was a major crisis that was effectively dealt with and the dire consequences everyone predicted were averted.

I should also mention another crisis, the budget crisis. This was clearly the major issue of the moment, and at great political cost to himself, President Bush worked with Congress to craft a package that brought about, I think—John, you'll correct me if I misstate this—a cut to the deficit of about \$500 billion over five years. It set the stage for one of the greatest periods of economic growth this country has ever had that lasted for *10 years*. Others were later able to bask in that success, but it was really President Bush and his courage that was able to bring about that accomplishment for the country.

We also worked very hard on major amendments to the Clean Air Act, to modernize that. The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which was the first major agreement to deal with the climate change issue. President Bush signed the first reform of immigration laws that had occurred in 50 years.

I'm leaving out a long list of things, but along with his well-known foreign policy accomplishments, I think there is a very strong case to be made that President Bush accomplished more in four years than most presidents have accomplished in eight. I think a lot of that has to do with not just the team he put together, but the type of person George Bush was.

First, President Bush was incredibly smart. He didn't wear it on his sleeve like some people, but he was a very, very smart man. He was able to hold incredible amounts of information in his head at any one time on a huge variety of different subjects, and he could do that without getting overwhelmed by the sheer volume of detail like I think some presidents may have been. Yet, he was also able to recognize and identify the top two or three things that were of such urgency and importance that they required most of his attention and focus as president. I think he did that very well.

The president was also an incredibly conscientious worker. I was blessed to see his workstyle up close and personal on a daily basis. He was a clean desk guy. You'd send him paper, and you would get it back with his comments and instructions written on it. I gave him homework to take to the residence every evening. I'd get buzzed at about 6:30 a.m. the next morning to come up to the Oval and collect the stuff he had stayed up working on the previous night. If he went to Camp David on the weekend, he took huge amounts of files and paper with him and brought it all back. It didn't disappear into some black hole or get scattered around the office. If you gave him things to read or react to, he read them, and you got it back very promptly.

President Bush also knew himself. He had been in responsible positions a long time, and I think he knew his own talents and strengths, but I think he maybe overstated some of his weaknesses. It seemed to me that he felt he was a poor public speaker, for example, and I don't think he was at all, but following Ronald Reagan, I think he was a little self-conscious on that subject.

Overall, I think President Bush was a genuinely warm, trustworthy person. I think it was one of his greatest strengths as a leader. I think that this entire group, getting together 30 years later, is proof of that. We're still in love with the guy, and I think so is everybody that's ever worked with him in any sort of senior position.

So, thank you for the opportunity to be with you today, even if it's virtual.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Thank you, Jim.

David Bates has 40 years of experience in politics, government, business, and law. He was President Bush's personal aid during his first campaign in 1978. In fact, I think that's when he and I met, when we were in Boston in '78 or '79. David spent time in the Department of Commerce and the Department of Treasury from 1981 through 1986 in the Reagan administration in international trade, working with Bush's 1988 presidential campaign and in the vice president's office.

Following President Bush's successful election in 1988, David served as assistant to the president and secretary to the Cabinet. The rivalry between the Cabinet is always a big thing in all administrations. David also served as President Bush's chief of staff in 1992.

David?

**David Q. Bates Jr.**

*Cabinet Secretary and Assistant to the President*

Thank you, Andrew.

It's a pleasure to be at the Bush School to commemorate its 25th anniversary, and it's always a pleasure to talk about our late, great president. To borrow the title of one of Chase's good books, a time when things went right. And let me say, it's also a pleasure just to be with my friends and former colleagues.

When I first talked to President Bush about being the secretary of the cabinet, the thing he emphasized to me was, "I want my Cabinet to feel *included*, to always feel like they're part of the team." I also think the president was particularly solicitous of the Cabinet's feelings because he was a former Cabinet member in two different presidential administrations. So, that was my North Star, and it set how I tried to go about doing my job.

Governor Sununu and Andy were always helpful to me in doing my job, which I appreciated. The president spent a lot of time with his Cabinet. Once a month, he would try to have lunch with a different Cabinet member. He did it in the Oval Office study. Governor Sununu and I would be there. I remember Boyden (Boyden Gray, counsel to the president) came to the lunches with Attorney General Thornburgh.

Our first year in office (I believe it was May of 1989), the president invited the Cabinet and their spouses to a dinner in the Rose Garden. It was a very special occasion, a beautiful spring night. He also invited the Cabinet and spouses to Camp David in the summer or early fall of 1989. It was on a Saturday. During the afternoon, they shot skeet, they swam, or they played tennis. I can remember Jack Kemp in a spirited doubles match with his shirt off, and Mrs. Bush bit her tongue. The activities were followed by a dinner in the main lodge at Camp David, another very special occasion.

Two to three times a year, President Bush would try to meet with his sub-Cabinet agency heads. That is to say, the agencies such as GSA [General Services Administration], OPM [U.S. Office of Personnel Management], OPIC [Overseas Private Investment Corporation], NASA, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The president would have lunch with them all in the Roosevelt Room, usually opening with five minutes of remarks. Then, he'd go around the table and have each agency head talk for five minutes about the focus of their agency, what their objectives were, and any challenges they were facing at the time.

Every two or three months, Governor Sununu (then chief of staff) would try to have a breakfast with the Cabinet. As I recall, the Governor usually had a couple of items he wanted to

impart, but it was mostly just an open, free-flowing discussion. President Bush even had the heads of the independent regulatory agencies in a reception in the White House mess. It was a cocktail reception. There was no discussion of substance since we couldn't talk to the independent regulatory agents about policy matters.

With the help of my staff, I tried to keep the Cabinet departments apprised of everything that was going on in the White House. After Governor Sununu's 7:30 a.m. staff meeting, I would meet with my staff. Each of my staff members had about three or four agencies they were responsible for staying in constant communication with. Their contacts were usually the chiefs of staff to the secretaries. Based on Governor Sununu's meeting, I would tell my staff about what our main event of the day was, and what message we were trying to drive with that day's event. I would also tell them about major news items that had arisen, and what Marlin [Marlin Fitzwater, White House press secretary] was going to say at his press briefing about it. My staff, in turn, would share all this information with their contacts in the different Cabinet departments.

My team and I also had a cabinet report that went to the president every Friday. We asked the Cabinet departments to get us their reports every Thursday including any big developments in their department that happened that week, as well as any major undertakings planned for the following week, such as major regulatory announcements, travel by the secretary, policy announcements and the like. I had a staff member named Michael Jackson who did yeoman's work in putting these reports together. He later became deputy secretary of transportation under Andy. But Michael would pull those together. He'd get all those different cabinet reports, and he would take the key highlights from each department and summarize them for a report to the president. The president read it religiously.

I'd gotten the idea for this when I was at treasury when Secretary Regan had asked for a management report from his assistant secretaries every Friday. Back when I was in treasury, I had some oversight of Customs, ATF [the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives] and the Office of Foreign Assets Control. We would ask those agencies for their management report every Thursday to incorporate into our weekly, Friday report. We learned a lot from them, and it helped us in doing our job.

A couple times, I didn't get the report to Jim [Jim Cicconi, White House staff secretary] on time to make the last Friday run out to Camp David. I would get a call Saturday morning, "Where's that cabinet report?"

We would often get the report back from Jim with comments from the president, such as to thank a secretary for some action or to learn more about a particular initiative. And I think that, along with the outstanding briefings my colleagues and Governor Sununu were providing the president, I think it really helped him be (at least in my mind) one of the most knowledgeable and conversant presidents about what was going on in their administration. In terms of the Cabinet policy-making bodies, there was the NSC, the Economic Policy Council, and the Domestic Policy Council. I'll leave the discussion of the two policy councils in Roger's good hands [Roger Porter, assistant to the president for economic and domestic policy].

I have an anecdote that shows how inclusive the president was towards his Cabinet. Early in the administration, we had an economic policy council matter involving the agriculture export enhancement program. I believe it was a subsidy, introduced prior to our administration, in

response to one of our international trading partners doing the same. But the question at hand was whether we would end the subsidy or phase it out over time. An options paper was developed by the working group, made up of assistant secretaries in conjunction with White House staff. Then the president met with the economic policy council members to talk about the options paper, talk about what to do. At the meeting, the president said:

"I'm not going to make a decision now. Let me read the paper again and think about this."

Well, after that meeting, the president invited the three cabinet members that were most involved in the issue: Bob Mosbacher (our commerce secretary), Carla Hills (our trade representative), and Clayton Yeutter (our agriculture secretary), to lunch in the Oval Office study, and he talked more about it. Then he took another day or two. I'm sure he talked to Roger again and Governor Sununu and then he made his decision.

Our full Cabinet meetings worked very similar to those in the Reagan administration. They were informational and coordination meetings. We held those about once a month on average. Typical agenda items would be Dick Darman talking about the budget process, where Cabinet departments needed to get their budget submissions in and what the pass-back and appeals process for the departments would be. Michael Boskin [chairman of the president's Council of Economic Advisers] would give periodic updates on the economy. I remember Sam Skinner (our transportation secretary) briefing the cabinet on the Exxon Valdez cleanup.

The president would always debrief the Cabinet after G7 meetings, and Secretary Baker would do the same after meeting of foreign ministers. Once, I even remember the president briefed the Cabinet on Tiananmen Square. Obviously, our substantive response to Tiananmen Square was decided in the National Security Council, what sanctions we were going to impose, but the president wanted the Cabinet to know both why we were taking the actions we were taking, and what we were saying publicly about the matter.

It was important for the Cabinet to have the same information and message on these types of major issues. They were going around the country promoting the president's agenda items that were in their portfolio. Invariably, they were doing press availability in their travels. Of course, the local press asked them about the particular policy program they were espousing, but inevitably there would be questions about other major issues that were affecting the administration, and it was good for these secretaries to know the president's position on those major issues.

One final point on our full Cabinet meetings: Before our first one, on the first day of the administration, the president told me shortly before the meeting that he wanted to have a prayer said before each Cabinet meeting, as was done during the Eisenhower presidency. He said he wanted a different Cabinet member to lead the prayer before each meeting, and that he wanted Secretary Baker to lead the prayer for the first meeting.

Let me just close by saying I think that our Cabinet worked well among themselves, and that they worked well with the White House staff. I think there are a couple reasons for that: firstly, the president—with both Chase Untermeyer and Governor Sununu's help—appointed high quality and high character people as secretaries. Secondly, the president led by example, the ultimate team player. Whenever things went right in the administration, which was most of the

time, he would say, “My administration,” or “*we* did this.” The few times that there was a hitch or some problem, that’s the only time he would use the I word. He always treated everyone with respect and dealt with people openly and honestly. He never played games, didn’t play people off against one another. He engendered a great deal of loyalty among those of us who worked for him, either in the White House or Cabinet departments. We were all just very, very fortunate to work for him. Thank you.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Now we have our final speaker.

Roger Porter served as assistant to the president for economic and domestic policy from '89 to '93, as the director of the White House Office of Policy Development in the Reagan administration, and executive secretary of the president's Economic Policy Board during the Ford administration.

Roger, is it true that you’re still a professor at the Kennedy School?

**Professor Roger B. Porter:**

*Assistant to the President for Economic and Domestic Policy*

Yes, I would like to be with you in College Station this evening, but I am teaching tomorrow morning at the Kennedy School.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Oh, okay. You *are* a rival, but we're welcoming you this evening, Roger, despite the institution which you're at now [audience laughs]. Thank you very much for being with us.

**Professor Roger B. Porter:**

Thank you very much. It is a delight to participate in this assessment of the George H.W. Bush administration, to spend time with treasured colleagues, and to reflect on a time that all of us remember fondly. It is a challenge to be objective about anything in which you were involved.

I will begin by reminding us of three things that were quite distinctive about the Bush 41 presidency: first, as Chase has pointed out, George H.W. Bush was the only newly elected president since Herbert Hoover in 1928 to succeed someone from the same political party. Most newly elected presidents define themselves in part, in contrast with their predecessor. That is relatively easy to do when there is a change of party. Second, since the end of the second World War, there is only one occasion in which a party was able to win three consecutive elections,

when Ronald Reagan won in 1980 and 1984, and when George Bush won in 1988. George Bush was also the first incumbent vice president to win a presidential election since Martin Van Buren in 1836. Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and Al Gore all tried and failed in that quest.

Third, and less well appreciated, George H.W. Bush came into office facing the largest opposition majorities in the Congress of any elected president in U.S. history. Fred McClure recognized the challenge this presented in producing majorities in both the House and the Senate. Ronald Reagan entered office in 1981 with a republican majority in the Senate and a working majority in the House. The House working majority was lost in the 1982 midterm elections. Republicans lost the Senate majority in 1986. George H.W. Bush's victory in the 1988 presidential election was not accompanied by the coattails enjoyed by many of his predecessors. In short, for his entire presidency he had to deal with opposition majorities in both houses of the Congress.

It is commonplace today to use the phrase "tone at the top" in both the public and private sectors, and many of our speakers this evening noted the tone that President Bush set for his administration by his words and his example. Like others, I found him to be an unusually modest man in light of his remarkable accomplishment-filled life on his journey to the Oval Office. I detected no trace of arrogance in his manner or in his thinking. He had a deep commitment to public service. Shortly after coming into office, he traveled to each of the Cabinet departments to hold a meeting in the departmental auditoriums to thank the career civil servants for the work that they did and to encourage them in the public service that they were rendering.

George Bush had a deep sense of integrity. He quietly insisted on careful accuracy in the information and statistics presented to him. He did not like numbers that were cherry-picked, preferring those that could be defended in the marketplace of ideas. He was also highly accessible to those who worked with him. That accessibility was facilitated by his Chief of Staff, John Sununu, and his deputy, Andy Card. George Bush had an abiding willingness to try to search for and find common ground. He did not question the motives of others. He consistently conveyed a tone of civility. He wanted what he described as an honorable administration.

This is a man who was very smart, who graduated from Beta Kappa from Yale, and who set a high standard in the way he thought, the way in which he approached problems, and the way in which he conducted himself. That was an incredibly powerful way of conveying what is often referred to as the tone at the top.

He was fascinated with the idea of people working together as a team. He selected people who had worked with one another before, who knew one another well, and who had respect and regard for one another. In such situations, there is the danger of what Victor Janis called "victims of groupthink." There was, however, little groupthink in the Bush 41 White House. This is because the president was very comfortable in having people convey their ideas in meetings and in having strong and spirited discussions. He wanted each option explored, carefully examined, and given its due. His White House remained what I call attached to reality. Sometimes within the context of the White House, people live in a cocoon. They seem disengaged from what is happening outside the beltway. That was not the kind of White House that George Bush established or that he maintained.



Finally, there is often some tension between those who have principal responsibility for formulating policy and those, like Fred McClure, whose principal responsibility was implementing policy and getting legislation passed. One of the key features of the Bush White House is that those two groups worked closely with one another. We had a standing order in our office that no one went to Capitol Hill without taking with them someone from the Office of Legislative Affairs. Or, if that was not possible, we would immediately report back, so that Fred and his people knew what was being done by those of us who were discussing policy issues with senators and representatives on the Hill.

Jim Cicconi ran an extremely disciplined process as staff secretary. His job was one of the most challenging, and I would argue one of the most important jobs in the White House. He conducted that office in a way that was widely viewed as fair. That proved to be a great asset to the president.

I have had the opportunity to work in the Ford, Reagan, and Bush administrations with six different chiefs of staff. I know of no chief of staff who was more accessible than John Sununu. If for some reason you could not get to John, you invariably could get to Andy Card. They worked extremely well as a team. These kinds of relationships are extremely important to a smoothly functioning White House.

Presidents come into office, as John has noted, with an agenda in their mind and great ambitions. At the same time, they must deal with reality. Many of the things which they must address involve what is happening in the world. Consider in four years the array of challenges that President Bush faced: the illegal activities of Manuel Noriega and the invasion of Panama, the massacre of student protestors in China's Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe (followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union itself), and the reunification of Germany within NATO over the initial objections of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, French President Francois Mitterrand, and the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Not least was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and assembling what at the time was the largest coalition of countries in world history to repel Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

In terms of the economy and domestic policy, as John Sununu has pointed out, President Bush faced a challenging situation with respect to the budget and an economy, which was in the seventh year of a recovery that was starting to slow. During President Bush's first year in office, the Congress approved roughly half of the spending restraint that the president had proposed in his initial budget; moreover, the budget deficit was projected to double in the next year. In short, President Bush faced a difficult, challenging situation. I have rarely seen anyone agonize as much as he did regarding what to do with respect to the budget deficit. During his years as vice president, bipartisan coalitions had produced budget agreements in 1982, 1984, and 1987, all of which had included restraint on the rate of growth of spending along with revenue increases. It was clear that the democratic Congress was not going to approve another budget deficit reduction package of any size that did not include both spending restraint and revenue increases.

Ultimately, the president decided to negotiate the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990. He agreed to do so largely because he was persuaded that the agreement would include two essential elements: caps on discretionary spending, and a PAYGO system. The PAYGO provisions permitted exceeding a spending cap, only if it were matched with a similar sized spending reduction elsewhere in the budget or an increase in revenue. Many economists have

claimed that the Budget Agreement of 1990 was the largest deficit reduction act in U.S. history. Interestingly, the budget caps were maintained by his successor when he came into office in 1993. Over a six-year period from 1995 to 2001, a democratic president and a republican Congress checked one another from increasing spending or reducing taxes, producing budget surpluses the last two years of the 20th century.

The budget was only a part of the president's domestic agenda. Working with the Congress, the president enacted legislation dealing with failed savings and loan institutions, education, the environment, immigration, energy, childcare, surface transportation, civil rights, as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act. Historians have concluded that the volume and quality of bipartisan legislation was high. This claim of quality is buttressed by the fact that rarely—if ever—did subsequent administrations seek to overturn it. In part, his success was the product of his veto strategy. As Fred noted, as long as he was there, no veto was overridden. For his full term, the president's success rate was 43 out of 44. His only loss was the battle to sustain his veto of cable television re-regulation vote in late 1992.

Rarely have presidents exercised as much skill in utilizing their veto, not simply to stop legislation they oppose, but often what I call catalytic vetoes, designed to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. We issued 937 statements of administration policy, which articulated (before Senators or representatives voted on the floor) the administration's position regarding what changes were absolutely needed. If the changes were not made, it would prompt the president's senior advisors to recommend a veto, along with desired changes, but that would not result in a veto recommendation. With the help of a research assistant, we examined nearly one thousand Statements of Administration Policies (SAPs), and discovered that after a veto was sustained, the administration prevailed over 75% of the time in the negotiations that followed. We had a better than 60% success rate on the less crucial amendments the administration favored. In short, President Bush skillfully used his veto power to persuade the Congress to produce a bipartisan outcome. I share my colleagues' views that the Bush administration was led by someone deeply committed to the country, to public service and to others. Many people when they reach the top of the political ladder become somewhat self-absorbed. That was not characteristic of George H.W. Bush.

One last anecdote. David Bates will appreciate this since he was often President Bush's tennis partner. I first met George Bush on the White House tennis court. I was frequently President Ford's partner.

One Saturday morning, I received a telephone call:

"The president want to know if you would be available to play tennis at one o'clock this afternoon?"

I responded, "Yes, who are we playing?"

"George Bush is back from China. He's going up next Tuesday for his confirmation hearing as CIA director and the president knows how much he likes to play tennis, and he's invited him to play."

I got to the court early. George Bush was the next to arrive. We started warming up. He was better than I expected. Those who make it to the top of the political ladder are often

intensely competitive. President Ford kept turning to me and saying, "Get this point, get this point!" [audience laughs].

In the first set, as we changed ends of the court, we were up 5-4. It was my turn to serve. The president turned to me and said, "Don't let me down, partner."

After the match was over, the president returned to the residence. George Bush turned to me and asked, "Can you get this court?"

"Yes," I said. There's only one court at the White House and there's a list of people who are eligible to schedule it.

"If I successfully get confirmed as CIA director, can you get yourself a partner?"

"Sure," I said.

"I'll give you a call."

The day after he was confirmed, he called me.

He would bring Jim Baker as his partner most of the time, who at the time was the deputy secretary of commerce. My partner was my boss, Bill Seidman. For most weeks, we would all play together.

I put a lot of stock in how people call lines in tennis. In a friendly match, there are no linesmen. Sometimes in the quest for victory, people give themselves the benefit of the doubt. I can honestly say I do not recall a single time when I had reason to question a line call by George Bush. If the ball was close, he called it in. That says a lot about him and reflects the integrity with which he approached the office and the way in which he dealt with those of us privileged to serve with him. Thank you.

#### **Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Thank you.

If our Bush School ambassadors could bring the audience's cards over, we'll ask some of the questions that you all in the audience have, but in the meantime, I want to ask a question Ron, or maybe all of you can answer.

Circling back to what you said Roger, I did not know that during Bush's administration this was the most hostile Congress, in terms of numbers, in American history in terms of numbers.

#### **Professor Roger B. Porter:**

Of any newly elected president.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Newly elected president.

**John H. Sununu:**

At one time, it was about 260 democrats to 175 republicans in the House, and 55-45 in the Senate.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Okay. He's correct. Good job, John. Sununu never makes mistakes in numbers.

**John H. Sununu:**

I know [audience laughs].

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

I have a topic that I'd like for us to discuss: the process behind the Clean Air Act. I read that there were weekly meetings with Congressional staff to work out the legislation, and the president would often physically attend see how the negotiations were going. I've never heard of a president accomplishing something like that. Let's talk about it.

**Professor Roger B. Porter:**

That was a *very* interesting experience. During early 1989, the administration developed a draft of legislation that was more than 600-pages and then sent it to Congress. John Dingell, the powerful, House Energy and Commerce Committee chairman, said he would not hold hearings on it in the House because he was convinced the president couldn't get the legislation through the Senate. Hearings were held by the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, following which, its staff followed up and developed their own bill.

Senator George Mitchell, who was the majority leader, very much wanted a bill, but he didn't believe that he could bring the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee bill to the floor and get 60 votes, so he wasn't going to bring the administration's bill to the floor in the state it was in. So, Senator Mitchell went to Bob Dole (the Senate majority republican leader), and Mitchell asked him to join him in going to the president and proposing that they negotiate an administration-leadership agreement. Mitchell would agree to produce a majority of democrats,

Dole would agree to produce a majority of republicans, and the president would agree to the agreement.

We held *136 hours* of negotiations in the majority leader's conference room during a month-long period. 99 of the 100 members of the Senate were in the room at one time or another. These negotiations were held at night, and there would be republican senators on one side of the table, democratic senators on the other side of the table. Senators Mitchell and Dole would sit at one end of the long conference table. The administration representatives (I, Boyden Gray, Bob Grady, Linda Stutz from Energy, and Bill Rosenberg from EPA) would sit at the other end of the table.

The negotiations occurred during the evening. I would return and report the next morning to both John Sununu and the president what the negotiations had accomplished the previous night. This lengthy process produced a bill that was approved on final passage by a vote of 89 to 11 with the overwhelming majority of republicans and democrats in favor of it. Everyone was included in the negotiations. I don't think it would have happened without the leadership of George Bush. This legislation effectively had been gridlocked for 13 years because no one had figured out a way to get the 60 votes needed in the Senate to prevent a successful filibuster.

John Dingell kept his word, producing a bill in the House. We then went to a conference committee, hashed out the differences, and we got the largest piece of environmental legislation signed in history. To his credit, George Bush gave a lot of credit to the republican and democrat Senators, who had been willing to work with him and his administration in producing the bill. That is a classic example of how he worked legislatively as president.

**John H. Sununu:**

Can I add a little bit to that?

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Yes, go ahead, John.

**John H. Sununu:**

Roger's being too modest. I said in my book that the Clean Air Bill was really a creation of Roger Porter, and he really deserves credit for having worked all the details through it. It's a very technical bill, and I give George Bush credit. He really trusted Roger Porter and my comments back to him about what we should fight for and what we shouldn't fight for. He trusted me as an old engineer. He knew that we had passed a Clean Air Bill in New Hampshire my last year as governor and really took it with faith, trusting his people to tell him that this was important to fight on, this was something you could yield on.

The key to that piece of legislation is that everybody identified things where they could give up a little to get a lot. I don't think that bill could be passed today, and I also don't think that bill could have been passed in the Reagan administration. I don't think that bill could have been passed without George Bush being president and having faith in his people to yield, if you will, on what may have seemed to be traditional positions that were non-yieldable, and yet it was a piece of legislation that worked.

I don't remember the exact numbers, but it's something like this: I think we estimated a cost of about \$2,000 a ton for abatement of emissions. Because the bill had cap and trade, allowing industries to do their least expensive way of getting the maximum amount of savings, I think the costs end up around \$200 or \$300 a ton, all because I think George Bush had faith in his team. Bush's attitude was let us go up there and negotiate and give and take and come back with something instead of standing firm on phony positions that were unyielding.

It's a great example of a White House taking the lead on a very important piece of legislation, and just grinding it out with staff hours and smart people to negotiate, almost House district by House district, and Senate state by Senate state, nuances that took care of the needs of each of the legislatures, and all of the legislators in the House and Senate that had to vote on this bill.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Very interesting.

I have one last question: Can politics ever return to the style of the two parties serving the greater good and compromising where it makes sense? Would anybody like to offer a comment on that?

**John H. Sununu:**

Yeah, I think what must happen for that to occur is that the American public has to deal with the new communication norms that exists today. Social media drives people's response to political issues. People are, if you will, influenced. They are not taught, and this idea of politics by influencers is a reality that we must begin to understand, and then we have to begin to communicate in a way that uses that process in a *civilized* manner rather than an *uncivilized* manner.

I've often said that Franklin Roosevelt discovered the radio, John Kennedy discovered the TV as a communications medium, Barack Obama discovered social media, Donald Trump manipulated social media, and now social media is out there being abused by people who want to inflame politics rather than bring it back to the old norm that we are all longing for. I think doing that requires an educational conversion by the public to understand what has happened to themselves because of social media. In my opinion, it will come, but it won't come quickly.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Any other comments from anyone?

**Chase Untermeyer:**

Let me say that I have a great faith in the American people for their good sense. If you look back through American history, there are waves of political rankers that in many ways were much worse than today. When looking back at the reconstruction period or the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, you realize that the norms were far more partisan, far more bitter, and far more divisive than today. Yet, that period was followed by the eras of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and later Franklin Roosevelt. So, the country *does* have the ability to turn around. It all depends on people. What people mess up, people can correct.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

I'll add that the perception that this wave of populism we've seen being unique is wrong. It is not unique at all; it's come after every major economic crisis. I don't mean a small recession, I mean a major depression like in the 1930s. There was one in the 1790s, there was one in the 1830s, there was one after the Civil War, and *each one of them* was followed by a huge increase in protectionism, isolationism, nativism, and ultra-nationalism. A group of dysfunctional things were at work: the mood, the protectionism at the beginning of the Depression... the same thing is happening now that all happened back then. Those are the common reactions when we've had major economic downturns.

We've had two major economic crises: the 2008 global financial crisis and then COVID, and they're not separated by 50 years, they're separated by 10 years or 12 years. My own opinion is that we are just now experiencing what's happened four or five other times in U.S. history, and I think we will grow out of it, frankly.

**Professor Roger B. Porter:**

I hope very much that your optimism is sound, and I'd like to share it. I would simply add one further observation: One of the big tasks of a president is to educate people as to what their real choices are. Most of what comes across in social media is what I call messaging. It tries to articulate a particular point of view, not to explain what our real choices are. Much of messaging claims that the solution to a problem is simple, straightforward, and relatively easy, if only other people would do what they want you to do.

That approach does not work in a democratic political system, and it never will.

This requires a president who is prepared to educate people as to what our real choices are. At the present time, we face a huge demographic challenge, one that we share with a large

number of countries, where the systems that we have in place are not capable of sustaining the set of entitlement programs that we have established.

We will have to make some changes. Those changes will either be forced on us or we can anticipate them. We can do it the easy way, or we can delay and do it the difficult way.

There is never a good time to do difficult things. The best way to get people to act is to acquaint them with what the real facts are. That is one of the most important elements of presidential leadership. I hope very much, Andrew, that you were correct because this is a great country. I would not trade it for any other country in the world by far. It will take a president prepared to lead by giving us a real sense of our realistic choices and help us understand the path we ought to take.

**Professor Andrew S. Natsios:**

Other comments from anyone?

Well, thank you all for coming this evening. It's been almost exactly two hours, and I think there's a lot of interesting stories and good substance from this evening. Thank you all for coming.



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