NOTE: This transcript was generated using an automated transcription service, and may contain typographical errors.

**Civics 101**

**Episode 18 - OFFICE OF SCHEDULING AND ADVANCE**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101. The podcast refresher course on some basics you may have forgotten since middle school. For this lesson, we are not going back to the history books but learning about the complicated demands of governing today. If you have trouble managing your personal appointment calendar imagine what it's like for the president of the United States. From daily meetings to promoting policies and speeches all across the country to elaborate trips abroad the Office of Scheduling and Advance at the White House make sure that the president is in the right place at the right time and gets there safely. We wanted to know how the office manages it day to day and what their responsibilities are. So we as someone who used to be in charge to help us with the basics. Alyssa Mastromonico was Director of Scheduling and Advance for President Obama from 2009 to 2011 and was deputy chief of staff from 2011 to 2014. She wrote about the experience in a memoir with the cheeky title "Who thought this was a good idea and other questions you should have answers to when you work in the White House" and she joins us now with some insight into what the Office of Scheduling and Advance does. Hello Alyssa and welcome to Civics 101.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:01:30] Hi Virginia thanks.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:32] What is the Office of Scheduling advance responsible for at the White House?

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:01:36] Scheduling and advance is responsible for coordinating all of the president's movements, and the first family and the vice president wherever they go with Secret Service, city officials the military office which runs Marine One and Air Force One, Camp David. Oh, we work with all of the other the departments of communications, policy the National Security Committee, something that many people don't know is that when the president travels the events are sponsored by Cabinet secretaries because the White House doesn't have a real a really extensive travel budget. So we were also sort of brokers and we would work with all the different agencies to get our trip sponsored depending on what what the president was focusing on in his remarks.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:26] Wow that's fascinating. So the the individual agencies paid for their travel.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:02:31] They do.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:33] Whoa. OK. So that's a lot of stuff going on. How many people make up this team.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:02:38] So it's pretty small. The White House schedule an advance team is about 35 people which also includes the White House travel office which is about four people.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:49] How many requests come in on a daily basis for the president's time and how then do you prioritize them.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:02:55] It is so hard. I would say that probably you know anywhere from 50 to 75 requests a day which you know maybe doesn't sound like that much. With the advent of e-mail it actually is it's probably higher because it's so much easier to get something into the White House.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:03:15] But we would sort through most try to give everybody a response because you know I felt very much as the leader of the department and everyone who worked with me agreed that we really wanted to have like a customer service aspect to us, like we were sort of the first line of defense. You know if people sent a note to us if they sent a request, well we wanted to give them a response. And if you know people were coming to us for help we always wanted to be like super service oriented. And so we would go through the the invitations that basically had no chance of happening because they were insane or we just couldn't go you know or there was a conflict or something. And then the ones that sort of made the final you know maybe 30 per week we would go over as a group and say you know OK based on what's happening should we do this. You know sometimes it's even like looking ahead in the calendar and saying oh you know because the one important thing to note is that President Obama does not like to disappoint people it's very like, very serious a very serious thing. And so he would say well we shouldn't do that because you know X Y Z bill might be on the floor and I'll have to be here and we might have to cancel. So literally everything from like the time of year to what was happening in Washington to you know what issues we were focusing on all came into play and we we went over them in a group of about 10 to 12.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:38] Then who had the final say on the schedule?

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:04:40] I guess. I think I did. I think I hate to say it but I think it was me. I mean ultimately of course the president does. But you know if the president is spending all day micromanaging his schedule that's not highest best use of their time. So yeah it was it was we controlled the document that catalog what he would be doing and where he'd be going so I'd I'd have to say it was us.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:04] Wow. So did you factor in unscheduled time you know in case something came up, or in case of a meeting or events were running late?

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:05:12] We did. We always tried. And this was something that was different. You know Barack Obama in the Senate was different than the campaign, was different than the White House. And one of the things that it took us a little while to catch on to is that you really have to learn to understand how someone's using their brain and how like I'm sure everybody thinks presidents are using their brain all the time. But it's like if there's an economic crisis and a meeting like withdrawing troops from Afghanistan like you maybe don't want to put those back to back, you know give him give his brain a little time to absorb what transpired from one meeting to another. Or you know President Obama I think did more make a wish visits. It's like what are these things you don't think about when you come to the White House. But maintaining the tradition of doing Make a Wish visits for terminally ill kids is something that we've all taken very seriously and the Bush folks did look tremendous job. And finally one day he said you know I really need I need a couple of minutes after those visits because they're so heart wrenching. And so we did always try to give him not just around those visits but we always tried to give him a little time to catch up. Mostly because meetings would run late and the time to catch up just meant he actually ended up not being late to the next thing.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:25] What happens when the schedule does fall apart. Who delivers the bad news.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:06:29] So I don't know how it was for past presidents though I understood President Bush to be very punctual. He does not like it because he does not like it when it's running late. He would keep a note card in his pocket. So he always had the tick tock of his day. So usually he knew if he was running over and therefore if you were on the outside of the Oval Office door and it was running over you usually knew that he wanted it to be running you know that he was engaged in something important because he was pretty good at breaking up meetings. But if it if it was running late we would sit down real quick with whomever was the personal aide outside the Oval Office and we'd say OK like what should we do. And we'd start backwards and we'd say OK well he has to be at this event. And these people usually we would look at anything where people have come out of town and try to preserve the timing of those events and move internal meetings around to sort of you know make up the difference.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:25] How much does how much policy did you need to know as director of scheduling in advance you know to have a handle on how to schedule the president's time. You mentioned you know you don't do the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan speech right back to back with another speech. But you know like there are times when you really had to let go the schedule protected and even run a little subterfuge. I'm thinking about this U.N. climate change summit in 2009.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:07:51] Yes, so in terms of policy I am not a policy person. I feel out of my depth when you know I'm sort of surrounded by too much policy. But I had to be honest about what I knew and what I didn't know and I thought that was actually a skill I honed in my time in the White House. But I definitely I caught up. I understood everything that was going on and had a pretty good grasp on all of this sort of tricky situations that we would be dealing with. But when we went to the climate change summit in Copenhagen it wasn't clear that there was going to be a deal coming out of that summit. And if leaders and heads of state were actually going to attend then about maybe three or four days before the summit was supposed to end we got word that you know leaders were going to be flying in and there might be a deal in a negotiation. So lo and behold we pack up our usual crew and we fly over to Copenhagen. We didn't even have hotel rooms because there weren't any. And so we were flying in and flying out. And what we did know is that there was a snowstorm fast approaching Washington D.C. We flew and slept overnight on the plane, landed. Went to the convention center where the room that we all sort of used as our hold room was a denim store and there were all these like weird naked mannequins in there.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:09:09] And you know we're there for a couple hours and all of a sudden Secretary Clinton comes in and says listen you know where are the Indians. And I was like I think Prime Minister Singh went to the airport. She's like find out. And so what had happened is they felt they were pretty close to a breakthrough. But the BRIC countries, Brazil South Africa India China, had sort of gone off to the side and were looking at making their own deal. And President Obama and Secretary Clinton found out and with the help of Secret Service and several others we found the room where the Chinese were hosting a meeting that was a secret. And President Obama had to like, he and Hillary locked arms and they charged through the Chinese secret security agents and opened up the door and said you know Premier Wen it was Premier Wen who was leading the negotiations for China, and he said Wen are you are you ready for us, and Obama and Clinton sat down. They made great headway and we were about about two minutes. It was. It was literally about two minutes from not being able to take off from Copenhagen to get back into Andrews Air Force Base. And so we had everybody loaded up on the buses. Obama and Clinton are still inside negotiating and the military aides who you know are the they are the aides the carried the nuclear football with the codes and continuity of government.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:29] The Biscuit, we've learned about this recently.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:10:31] Yes. Yes. And so they said Alyssa, we've got to go. And I said but he's so close to a deal like we really have to hedge and so lo and behold we made it with two minutes to spare.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:10:43] And the military aides were not happy with me and it was the roughest landing we ever had an air force one but made it home safe and sound.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:51] How about the protocols. How much does that change with each administration. Like were there things that the Bush administration did regarding the schedule that you did not do or vice versa.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:11:02] No I think that you know we look at what the Bush administration had done we used their system that they used like data system that they kept the schedule on. We followed their protocols. We were happy for the templates. And you know mostly the real the protocols that I always felt so important to maintain were foreign, like you know State Department protocols and then military protocols because to me it's about showing respect. And so we we I can't think of one thing we really changed.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:32] What in your mind makes for a good director of scheduling and advance. If you're going to hire someone for the job what would you be looking for.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:11:39] So I would want someone who was able to sort of compartmentalize. We have this funny sort of saying that you couldn't be someone, that if someone was coming to us and pitching an event for Obama that we always had to look at them and be like you really think it's a good event? Are you doing this because you benefit somehow? And we called it home state interests. And we would always joke we're like. Are these things, are these good ones or do you think there's some home state interest involved. And so I would want someone who could stand up who could explain why they think something is a good idea or a bad idea. And yeah I really think that judgment is the number one thing because you can get the nuts and bolts down but you need to understand the person you're working for. What's important for them and then be able to sift through everything that comes their way and understand their agenda and what they want to accomplish as much as possible and just drive that through.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:35] Alyssa, I'm in awe of you for doing the job. But thank you for bringing us into the office of Scheduling and Advance.

**Alyssa Mastromonaco:** [00:12:41] Virginia, thank you so much and have a great day.