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***[Virginia Prescott] Today: inside the White House. The president has a cabinet of appointed officials helping to run the country. But how about the people behind the scenes? What is it like to be a staffer in the highest office in the land?***

***Karen Hult is with us. She's chair of the Department of Political Science at Virginia Tech's College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences.***

***Karen, great to have you with us.***

[Karen Hult] Thank you. Good to be here.

***[VP] We often read or hear quotes attributed to White House staffers. So, broadly speaking, what does that mean, white house staffer?***

[KH] Well it means a variety of things to a variety of people. For me as someone who studies this a little bit it means the 500 or so people who work in the White House office and that includes people who are advising the president on national security or domestic policy, his speechwriters, some of his political advisers, the press secretary, but also people who help cook food, make sure the correspondence is handled, answer telephone calls to the president.

***[VP] And where do these staffers work?***

[KH] Most of the professional and more important White House staffers are in the West Wing of the White House. The overflow staffers also work in the nearby Eisenhower Executive Office Building and some work in the New Executive Office Building. The East Wing is largely for the first lady's staff.

***[VP] So there is a support staff at the White House, you know, people who are cooking the meals and cleaning and infrastructure, that kind of thing. But let's focus on the political jobs. So from a hiring point of view, what degree of education or background is typical for, let's say, a new aide or a White House staffer?***

[KH] Well the White House pretty much clears out at the professional level with every new president. Most of the people who enter the White House with new presidents will have at least college degrees, some will have advanced degrees, some in the White House Counsel's Office will certainly have law degrees. Many others will have Ph.D.s, master's degrees, and so on. How did they get there, well the White House receives lots of resumes going into the presidency. And while the person who's president is there many will come from the president's campaign staff, others will have worked for the president's party and also worked for other presidents of that party and will come from a variety of other places.

***[VP] We often do hear of political aides broken up by seniority. Is that kind of a typical breakdown for aids, what kind of jobs are junior or senior?***

[KH] Well it can be a variety of things of course to some extent in the White House it's going to depend on who it is at higher levels of authority. Often those will be more experienced and somewhat older workers and so the senior staffers will be those that may be for example assistant to the president more junior staffers will be assistant to the assistant or in other kinds of lower level positions in the White House.

***[VP] So these are the people who might be doing research or writing reports or coming up with a policy draft, is that a junior staffer job?***

[KH] That's a lot of what they do. They're also the people that are going to be keeping in touch with folks in the executive branch bureaucracy with people in state governments with people on Capitol Hill and really with a range of constituents around the country.

***[VP] Given the scale of the jobs that need to be done in running a country and all of the different outreach positions and representation, it seems like 500 staffers is barely enough.***

[KH] Well, a lot of presidents come to recognize that. Many have run for office saying, ‘I'm going to cut the size of the White House staff.’ And when they do that they find out often to their dismay that it's possible to cut it too far.

***[VP] How are these staffers paid, a salary or contractual?***

[KH] Another great question. Most of the ones on the White House office staff will be on a salary basis. How are the salaries determined, the White House since about the early 1980s has gotten an appropriations line from the congressional appropriations committee. That line then is set for a total amount in the White House has to decide how to divide that amount among its staffers. These compared to working in the private sector and even the nonprofit sector are not terribly highly paid jobs in that salary accounting. The more senior staffers will be paid more than the more junior staffers.

***[VP] How has staffing changed for the president's office since the country was founded?***

[KH] Oh it's changed dramatically. Actually presidents paid for their own staffers up until the late 1800s with their own salary and oftentimes that meant then that they relied on family members often sons but also sometimes paid secretaries that they paid out of their own resources. It wasn't until the 1700s and 1800s that Congress began to see that perhaps there should be some provision made for folks that help the president.

But in fact there was no really sizable professional staff if you will in the White House until we got to Herbert Hoover. Herbert Hoover was the first president who had more than one professional staffer. He was the first president that had a press secretary for example and the staff increased somewhat in size after the Brownville committee report in the late 1930s. And Congress finally authorized the White House office in 1939.

But even then the White House only had seven professional staffers. It grew in size as we moved into the depression years and certainly World War 2 and post-World War 2 the sizable increase in the White House probably took place as we moved into Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and then from there it stabilized pretty much between four and five hundred people.

***[VP] That's really interesting given that citizens and interest groups and some lawmakers have called out President Trump for having members of his family working in the White House. You say family members used to have a place there.***

[KH] It used to be family members although for somewhat different reasons. It was because there was no other way to provide for the work being done. By this point, it's terribly rare to have direct family members working in a professional White House staff position.

***[VP] Is there any legal reason why that shouldn't be done?***

[KH] As far as I know there is no technical legal reason. There are some ethics and conflict of interest laws that began to take effect but that has less to do with the family membership and more to do with certain kinds of financial dealings that the family may be involved in.

***[VP] You said that staffers often come from campaigns, but during an election year or years, are aides in the White House expected to work on campaigns along with their day to day operations?***

[KH] Well, legally they may not. And so one of the things that White House lawyers do going into a campaign is talk with staff about when they can legally work on a campaign. Typically that involves taking leave of absence and those are unpaid leave of absence to work on the campaign itself.

***[VP] What happens to staffers if the president is not re-elected or resigns or is impeached?***

[KH] It's going to vary depending on those situations. If a president is not re-elected that means that most of the ones that we think of as the White House staff will be looking for other jobs. Many of them will be able to leverage and build upon their experience in the White House to move out into teaching jobs, jobs with interest groups, jobs with law firms. Even the Washington D.C. area or around the country.

If the president is impeached, some of the current staff will stay on to help with the transition. If we remember for example not impeachment but when President Nixon resigned many of the staff stayed on for a period of time. And indeed during that period the White House staff expand greatly in number because on the one hand you had the leftover Nixon's staff and on the other hand Ford was trying to build his own staff.

***[VP] So you're describing a job with low pay, it’s pretty unpredictable in terms of job security. What's the benefit here? Why do folks want to work in the White House?***

[KH] Well it's exciting to be in a place of power. It's exciting to be in a place where one feels that one is having an impact on policy making and political decision making.

The final other cost of the job is that it is just relentless in terms of the pressure and the hours of the day. And so that if one reads oral histories with people that have worked in the White House they tell stories about not seeing their children grow up. It often leads to broken marriages, other personal difficulties, because many days are unrelenting, can be as long as 18 hours on a consistent basis. For all of that, most White House staffers will say at the end of the experience it was difficult, I left tired and it took me quite a while to catch up, but it was a great experience of public service.

***[VP] So some people do stay in government after being White House staffers some do not. I'm sure there are some that have resurfaced in administrations since. Can you think of any that got their start on the floor of the White House?***

[KH] There probably are a variety of those examples I suppose the one that comes to my mind right away is of course Vice President Richard Cheney who we may remember was the chief of staff in the Ford administration but worked on the Nixon White House staff and then continued on into the Ford White House staff and ultimately became the chief of staff for President Ford. So those kinds of stories are unusual but not unheard of. Clark Clifford is another example of someone who started on the Truman staff and was important in public policy and advising presidents for the rest of his life. Donald Rumsfeld has a similar story as well.

***[VP] There's been a lot of talk in this administration about leaks at the White House and a determination to stop leaks, and oftentimes it is White House staffers quoted without attribution that are the source of these leaks. So would somebody on the ground at the White House likely have a clear picture of what's going on in other parts of the executive office?***

[KH] Very difficult to do that. The schedule is unrelenting, especially as one gets down to the lower levels of the White House hierarchy. There's very little way for many of those staffers to know exactly what's happening in and around the White House office. There also is, as in most administrations, there is a tendency of at least some staffers trying to make points to some of their some of their colleagues by going outside the White House and hoping the information gets back in. In this administration, it appears as though there is there's clear concerns of people that they don't think are being heard by folks elsewhere in the White House that they want to make sure somebody is hearing about and reporting on.

***[VP] Karen, what's our takeaway from this episode? Something that maybe we should know about the White House aides and staffers that most of us had not considered?***

[KH] I guess what I would say is that this is a developing institution that has been around in some form at least in the form it's in now at least since the Nixon administration and there have been really very few shifts in what the White House does and in some ways in how it's organized. And when we say that we also need to make sure that many of those people are indeed professionals and expert at what they do in addition to having some political commitments and some party activity as well.