**Civics 101**

**Episode 1: Chief of Staff**

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**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:24] I’m Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101. The podcast that teaches you things you should have learned or maybe forgot from your high school U.S. history and government classes. W thought the first 100 days of the Trump administration the perfect time for a little refresher. Each week we'll answer one question like, how do vetoes work? What does a White House press secretary do? What is gerrymandering? Today the role of the Chief of Staff - and Professor Charles Wolcott is our guy. He's Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Virginia Tech. For the past two decades his research has focused on understanding the structural evolution and workings of the executive office. Professor Wolcott, welcome to Civics 101.

**Charles Wolcott:** [00:01:11] Thank you. Happy to be here. So there is nothing mandated in the constitution for this position.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:17] When did White House chief of staff become a position?

**Charles Wolcott:** it really became a position in the modern sense in the Eisenhower administration. The White House staff, technically the White House office, was legally created in 1939 under FDR. But at that time it had only about a half a dozen professional staffers. It wasn't a big deal to manage it. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, all kinds of war reconstruction agencies were loaded into the White House because there was no place else organizationally to put them.  And the White House suddenly grew to having a couple of hundred staffers and it became a management problem. Harry Truman managed it by doing it himself,  by having lots of people who could get access to him and it worked out pretty well. But when Eisenhower took over he was used to having someone on his staff as a general who would take care of running the organization while he made the consequential decisions. So he asked Sherman Adams of New Hampshire to move into the White House and become the first chief of staff except that I didn't call him a chief of staff because he thought that would sound to military. He called him the assistant to the president and that's when the chief of staff got started.

**Virginia Prescott**: What is the role of the chief of staff?

**Charles Wolcott:**  The chief of staff  organizes the rest of the White House. There are any number of White House offices, congressional liaison, counsel to the president. There are offices that deal with interest groups, there are policymaking offices, there's the press office the communications office all that stuff has to be coordinated and managed.

[00:03:08] And it's something that presidents simply don't have time to do. So the first thing a White House chief of staff does is select most of those personnel or at least participate in selecting those people and managing them, supervising them, trying to make them work as a unit.

**Virginia Prescott:** With selecting and managing which probably also means firing.

**Charles Wolcott:** Most presidents don't like firing people. And they often delegate that to the chief of staff. Yes that's one of the job,s that is one of the downsides of the job.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:42] So a little bit of an enforcer for the president it sounds like.

**Charles Wolcott:** [00:03:46] Yes. Sherman Adams nickname when he was serving Ike in the White House was “the Abominable No-man”. No, as in says no to people who want to see the president, who want to influence the president. He was protecting the president. And yes that's been a positional requirement ever since. But the second most important thing, and I think that in the coming Trump White House maybe the most important thing, is structuring what's known as the staff system it's a way of preparing decision issues for the President to decide. The idea is to draw in the comments, the recommendations, the opinions of everybody in the administration who might have an interest or some expertise in the issue or something at stake in the issue. Collect them, organize them, and get them to the president in a form that the president wants them. Most of them want these on paper. That means giving the president as much to work with as you possibly can.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:52] What would you look for in a person to be an effective chief of staff? Clearly somebody who can play the role of the enforcer, or someone who has some sense of discernment. What else?

**Charles Wolcott:** [00:05:06] The chief of staff has to be what's called an honest broker.

If this central job of bringing in all the possible shades of opinion and points of view is to work, everybody else in the system has to be confident that the chief isn't spinning it, that the chief isn't working his own agenda trying to dictate the outcome. Trying to structure things so the president will choose X or Y. That's the only way you can have confidence that the system works, if the chief of staff is seen as somebody who will fairly and honestly represent all the shades of opinion, including those he doesn't agree with.

**Virginia Prescott:** What would be the typical daily routine for a chief of staff?

**Charles Wolcott:** The Chief of staff would attend morning staff meetings there almost always early morning staff meetings of top presidential staff. At the end of the day and throughout the day is preparing paper to go to the president or is sitting in meetings with the president. In most administrations the chief of staff or one of his deputies sits in on all important meetings with the president.

[00:06:11] Jim Baker who's been chief of staff a couple of times likes to talk about what he calls “oh by the way” issues...when somebody is sitting there talking to the president they're talking about an issue that the president understood would be discussed, they discuss it, whoever it is the secretary of the department or whoever it might be gets up to leave, and then turns to the president says, “oh by the way,” and then quickly requests something that the president is absolutely unprepared for.

**Virginia Prescott:**  Who reports to them?

**Charles Wolcott:** Everybody else in the White House except possibly the National Security Assistant, the national security side kind of runs itself and is usually independent from the chief of staff's management operation. Everybody, else the counsel to the president, the press secretary, the communications director, all those people as part of the White House organization they report to the chief. Now some people sometimes have walk in privileges with the president and do not have to actually ask the chief for permission to see the president. But most people report to the chief and they can't get to see the president unless the chief approves it.

**Virginia Prescott:**[00:07:15] So it sounds like there's a lot of power in this position.They're gatekeepers they're enforcers. Can you give us an example of a chief of staff having any real specific or notable influence on policy or presidential decision making?

**Charles Wolcott:** [00:07:31] One of my favorite stories is a story that Bob Haldeman, Nixon's first chief of staff used to tell talking about protecting the president. This isn't a specific policy decision but it's a sort of general thing chiefs of staff can do. Haldeman talked about at least one instance in which he would come in to the Oval Office and Nixon would be fuming because some senator had made a speech critical of the Vietnam policy of the administration.

[00:07:58] Nixon pounds the table and he says we want to put 24 hour surveillance on that bastard! Now go and Haldeman understanding that you can't run the government that way would leave. Forget about it for about two days. He's back in the Oval Office again, Nixon asked him why did you take care of the surveillance on that Senator. And Haldeman would say, Well no, and Nixon would say well it's probably better that way. He had finally calmed down and the chief of staff, by refusing to carry out the order but not overtly refusing just not doing it, had actually protected the president's interests. There's

[00:08:41] that kind of influence that any good chief can have sort of compensating for the president's foibles in whatever way is necessary. But otherwise Chiefs of Staff have very important opportunities to influence presidents and some of them try to in some of them don't some have policy specialties. Obama's first chief of staff Rahm Emanuel was much more of an electoral politics and public policy type a guy, who came came in from Congress, and had a lot of influence on, for example, the decision the discussions around the health care plan. So it depends on the individual it depends on what the president wants.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:23] How about in this incoming administration?  So Steve Bannon was passed over for chief of staff, Reince Priebus named instead, former chair of the RNC. This is a man with considerable political experience in the game so to speak. What are some precedents of how those two positions have worked together, the chief strategist and the chief of staff that come to mind for you?

**Charles Wolcott:** [00:09:47] Well the first one that comes to mind is George W. Bush and Karl Rove. Rove was Bush's political strategist, political hitman in effect. And I think his role was somewhat similar to that that Bannon's going to play, and it was a much more prominent role in that in the White House than the chief of staff, Andy Card, was George W. Bush's first chief of staff, who more or less remained in the background, made the trains run on time and didn't get famous doing the job. I have a feeling that that's kind of the model that Priebus is going to be the honest broker who tries very hard to regulate the system discipline the president make sure everything operates as it should. And Bannon is both a political strategist and I think an idea guy, he's going to be probably much more involved in policy than Priebus will be.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:44] So Professor Wolcott you know we're trying to understand how the system works and how civics, for lack of a better word, works. Is there anything there for you, that's really important that people know about their chief of staff named by a president?

**Charles Wolcott:** [00:10:58] I think that there's going to be a controversy in the Trump administration and probably people ought to understand what a chief of staff does, because Donald Trump has said he wants to run an organization that recalls what Jimmy Carter or Jerry Ford wanted, he wants a flat organization. You'll have a chief of staff, but he doesn't want a chief of staff who regulates the flow of information that closely or who keeps people away from him. This isn't going to work. It's going to turn out to be overwhelming. The president has way too much to do to also on the side, discipline the White House. So there are going to be a learning curve here. And I think that Priebus will take on more and more importance as the Trump administration goes on, and as Trump realizes he's going to have to lean on his chief for some discipline. At that point I think people ought to understand what the chief does. It's not that the chief tries to put the president in a bubble and wall him off from all inputs. It’s that the chief tries to regulate and ensure that the president gets all inputs. And I actually think Donald Trump needs to figure that one out.