

**OPERATIONS OF THE WHITE HOUSE CONGRESSIONAL RELATIONS OFFICE**  
**UNDER PRESIDENT RICHARD M. NIXON**

**By**

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The organization chart for the Office of Congressional Relations provided an Assistant or Counselor to the President, two Deputy Assistants and two Special Assistants with one of each assigned either the Senate or to the House of Representatives. The Assistant to the President also had a personal aide. Each official employed a secretary, and there was a three-person Correspondence Unit. Late in the Administration additional staff was added to the legislative operations. Because of the intensity and energy of congressional relations activities the staff burn out rate was high. Only one staff person was there the full six years of President Nixon's terms, several remained three years, but most were not able to withstand the pressures or left for other reasons after two years or less.

The Assistant, and when titled Counselor, was housed in an office on the first floor of the West Wing of the White House between the Chief of Staff and the Assistant for National Security. In 1975 and thereafter this valuable property was used by the Vice President. The Deputies and Special Assistants and supporting staff were headquartered on the first floor of the East Wing which provided quicker access to transportation to Capitol Hill and since located within the White House itself remained a prestigious location which sent a message to Members of Congress about the importance of this Office.

The Correspondence Unit processed incoming and outgoing mail under senior staff supervision. Normally incoming letters were logged for tracking purposes, an acknowledgement was typed for staff signature, and referred to the appropriate office for substantive reply. The final letter to a Member of Congress was drafted either for the President's signature or for NSC, Domestic Council, OMB, or congressional staff. The Assistant to the President summarized important congressional mail in a weekly memo to the Chief Executive so he could be aware of Members' interests and take personal action if required.

The legislative staff had numerous coordinating meetings during the day. Normal working hours were 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM with half day on Saturday. All stayed on station if Congress was in session or if the President had need for them. When the legislative branch was in recess and the President out of town the staff relaxed working hours somewhat, but even then Capitol Hill and White House staff had needs to be addressed. The Assistant attended H.R. Haldeman's senior staff meeting at 8:00 AM, and Deputy Assistants participated in 7:30 AM sessions of the Domestic Council staff along with representatives of OMB, Press Office, and other relevant White House staff. All Congressional Relations personnel assembled afterwards to report on these meetings and outline the day's activities so everybody could be aware of current operations. To insure full reporting at these meeting, legislative staff regularly met early in the day with Senate and House senior staff to coordinate the legislative day.

Legislative officers in the departments and key agencies were asked to submit by close of business on Fridays a summary of their work during the week. These highlighted the status of bills they were following, an outlook for the following week, and if White House support was needed. Also, these officers were invited to a Saturday morning meeting in the Roosevelt Room to discuss Administration legislation. The President attended several of these sessions and gave short addresses to the group; sometimes the Chief of Staff came to give a pep talk.

On one occasion the Office invited the department legislative officers to Camp David for a one-day discussion of missions and opportunities. Flying by helicopters and seeing the President's retreat was a special occasion for all.

The congressional staff prepared memoranda to the President for every contact he had with Senators and Representatives, including regular Republican leadership and bipartisan leadership meetings, one-on-one and small group sessions, many small breakfasts in the residence, occasional lunches in the State Dining Room, bill signings, receptions, Presidential yacht Sequoia and Air Force One trips, and telephone calls. Congressional staff always attended these events. The standard format was a memo title, time of the meeting and its expected length, place, purpose, background, participants, agenda and talking points as well as a press plan (sometimes just the White House photographer and guidance to the press secretary). These briefing papers ranged from a single page to many and some required an appendix. Also, after Congressmen met

one-on-one with the President the legislative staff covering the events wrote short single page summaries of the highlights and important points discussed, especially if the President committed to something during the session.

The Office of Legislative Affairs wrote frequent memos to the President about timely congressional action or inaction. Most of these were for information only, but a few required action. Occasionally the President would jot a note “good strategy” or “good report, let’s see who tells the truth later today.” Sometimes staff assistant Steve Bull or Presidential Secretary Rosemary Woods called congressional staff to the Oval Office to discuss in more detail an item in the memorandum. Even when he was in Key Biscayne or San Clemente the President would telephone over the weekend to inquire about some aspects of a report.

President Nixon agreed with the staff recommendation to schedule weekly half hour meetings in the Oval Office with Members of Congress who wanted to see him for non-substantive matters, such as bringing a constituent to the White House, having a picture taken, or presenting the President with a gift. The Legislative Office accompanied Members, usually in ten minute segments.

Staff recommended Members of Congress as guests for State Dinners. The norm was four bipartisan Representatives and four Senators, but these numbers varied according to the visiting Head of State and special circumstances. Worship services in the White House presented staff with greater flexibility, and numbers of House Members averaged about 80 with Senators about 20.

With presidential approval the Congressional Relations staff periodically used his yacht Sequoia for evening trips down the Potomac River with selected Members of Congress. Also, President Nixon permitted staff to occupy his special box at the Kennedy Center for interesting musical or dramatic performances. Regularly, Members of Congress and spouses were invited to join. Sunday prayer service in the White House and big name evening entertainment in the East Room also gave staff opportunities to invite and socialize with key legislators. Invitations such as these events recognized loyalty and rewarded supporters.

The President was well aware of the need to emphasize that the legislative affairs staff were his representatives before Congress. The Assistant to the President always was seated with the First Lady in the President's box during State of the Union Address and other speeches he made to Congress. Once, for a new Members' reception, he had the Assistant stand in front of the receiving line to introduce Members and spouses to him. A member of the staff went to China; another attended the Vietnam Peace Talks in Paris. On the Presidents' travels to sporting events, funerals, accessing flood damage, and even political rallies someone from the legislative office accompanied him. Usually they were there for the care and feeding of Congressmen, but often they traveled when no Members were present.

Early in the Administration the Assistant and Deputy Assistants scheduled regular hour-long sessions in both the House Minority Leader's and Senate Republican Leader's offices to meet with any Member wishing face time to offer suggestions or complain about some slight or action. House and Senate Republicans, and some Democrats, availed themselves of these opportunities, and the Leaders maintained the schedule.

The real value of the congressional relations staff was shepherding the President's legislation through Congress or defeating pernicious measures. The initial phase was to put the proposal in legislative language, usually by professionals at OMB, with attention to tailoring it for referral to a sympathetic committee of Congress. Prominent Members of the Senate and House of Representatives were recruited to sponsor the draft bill. Ideally leaders of both parties would introduce the measure along with committee chairmen and ranking Member. A formal Message to Congress was prepared, and various staff from the White House wrote talking points and floor speeches for cosponsors. Leaders and the committee's chief of staff/counsel were consulted about timing of consideration by the subcommittee with jurisdiction. Testimony was prepared for Administration witnesses, and Members' questions were answered. Frequently a press plan was developed. Department and agency heads and their staffs were enlisted to contact Members with whom they had relationships. The White House Public Liaison Office reached out to supportive business, labor, and public interest groups.

Heavy lobbying occurred, and votes were counted among subcommittee Members by the White House Office of Legislative Affairs, party leaders, and cosponsors. The President was asked to make telephone calls and meet with key Members. After a favorable subcommittee vote the full congressional committee would consider the measure, and the process was repeated in full. In the House of Representatives another hurdle was the Rules Committee that had to vote to clear bills for Floor consideration with times for debate allotted to each side. Personnel from the Office of Legislative Affairs moved into high gear for a Floor vote along with party whips working their Members. Selected Congressmen from the opposition party were urged to support the bill and reasons were provided, including impact on their constituents. Floor speeches were prepared and distributed. "Carrot and Stick" initiatives designed to encourage support occurred.

White House congressional staff had to be knowledgeable about House and Senate Rules and parliamentary procedures in each body. For example, in the House the motion to recommit after Floor action on a bill was reserved to the minority party and could be made with or without instructions by a Member voting against the measure. In the Senate a cloture motion to cut off debate required a two-thirds (67 Senators) vote [changed in 1975 to 60 votes]. Each committee in the Senate and House had its own rules of operation, and White House lobbyists had to understand them. When a bill came up for Floor votes White House staff used the Vice President's Office off the Senate Floor to headquarter its operations. This Office was adjacent to the historical "lobby" where Senators could be called off the Senate Floor for consultations. In the House the legislative staff used the Republican Whip's office very close to the House Floor.

When passed by one body the engrossed bill moved to the other for consideration unless there already was a companion measure under review. The process of introduction, subcommittee, full committee, and Floor consideration parallel the action of the previous house action. Once the second body passed the bill, with any amendments, it was sent to a conference committee with senior Members from both sides to reconcile differences. Careful attention was always given to this stage in an effort to produce acceptable language. The Conference Report had to be adopted by both houses, and vote checks were again undertaken and persuasion ensued. Once in final form the legislation was

enrolled and sent to the President where OMB, pertinent departments and policy offices went over the measure line-by-line to make sure it was acceptable. The President frequently wished to have a public signing ceremony, and invitations were issued to leaders and those strongest supporters. A press plan was put in place, and sufficient signing pens made available to hand out to key Members of Congress as souvenirs.

For legislation opposed by the Administration the various steps in the process offered opportunities to defeat – or at least amend – the bills. Not infrequently the President authorized staff to signal a likely or certain veto awaited final passage of harmful legislation.

President Nixon was the first to use the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution that provided for nomination and confirmation of a Vice President when a vacancy occurred. When Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned in 1973 the President nominated House Minority Leader Gerald Ford to be Vice President. In 1974 when Ford became President he named former New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller to fill the post. While experienced in many confirmations of Executive Branch officers and judges, including nominees for the Supreme Court, this new step required considerable effort by the legislative staff, especially since the House as well as the Senate had to vote. Possible embarrassing backgrounds of both nominees had to be identified and handled delicately.

There are about 300 committees in Congress, including special, select, joint, and subcommittee. Each has its own membership, method of operation, jurisdiction, and tradition. Power was therefore diffused, and effective liaison difficult. Staff relations with Members had to consider their traits, personality, and ambition as well as the usual measurement of philosophy, party loyalty, and special interest. As a rule of thumb White House lobbyists calculated 40 percent would be opposed to the President on any issue, 40 percent would be supportive, and 20 percent were swing votes where staff concentration was focused.

There were no cell or smart phones, no tabletop or laptop computers during the Nixon Administration. Although there were Senate and House floor audio transmissions of proceedings in the late 60s and early 70s, the gavel to gavel CSpan coverage did not begin in the House until 1979 and 1986 in the Senate.

**Consequently, during the Nixon years the workload for the Office of Legislative Affairs was immense and high-pressured. On a typical day when Congress was in session the office received approximately 400 incoming telephone calls and placed 600 outgoing; processed 200 pieces of paper (correspondence, memoranda, action reports etc.); made an average of six trips to Capitol Hill; and attended four structured White House staff meetings. There were an average of 15 votes somewhere in the legislative system during a congressional day. This included action on the floors of both chambers, committees, subcommittees, conferences, and their reports.**

**Statistics from the 91<sup>st</sup> Congress (1969 & 1970) are illustrative of President Nixon's six years in the Oval Office. In Congress there were 695 public bills enacted, 3,317 measures passed, 29,041 bills introduced, 1,110 yea-and nay votes taken, 11 vetoed with 2 overridden. Also there were 7,253 civilian nominations confirmed (not including military or postmasters).**

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