



**GERALD FORD ORAL HISTORY SYMPOSIUM**

**THE FORD WHITE HOUSE**  
**A Miller Center Conference Chaired by Herbert J. Storing**

**SECOND SESSION**

April 23, 1977  
Charlottesville, VA

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To cite an interview, please use the following general format: The Ford White House, Second Session, April 23, 1977, Gerald Ford Oral History Symposium, Miller Center, University of Virginia.



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James E. Connor—secretary to the Cabinet, 1975–77; staff secretary to the President, 1975–77.

Robert A. Goldwin—special consultant to the President, 1974–76; advisor to the secretary of defense, 1976.

Jerry H. Jones—deputy assistant to the President, 1976–77; special assistant to the President and director of the Scheduling and Advance Office, 1975–76.

James T. Lynn—director of the Office of Management and Budget, 1975–77; secretary of housing and urban development, 1973–75.

John O. Marsh Jr.—counselor to the President, 1974–77.

Paul H. O'Neill—deputy director of the Office Management and Budget, 1974–77.

Donald H. Rumsfeld—assistant to the President and member of his Cabinet, 1974–75; secretary of defense, 1975–77.

Brent Scowcroft—assistant to the President for national security affairs, 1975–77; deputy assistant to the President for national security affairs, 1973–75.

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# GERALD FORD ORAL HISTORY SYMPOSIUM

## THE FORD WHITE HOUSE

### SECOND SESSION

April 23, 1977

[Discussion here of alternative ways of organizing the White House staff and changes in the Ford White House staff system.]

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**James E. Connor:** When we talk about good decisions in a presidential perspective, I don't think we need talk about substance of the decision: is this wise economic policy or not? The purpose of a system is to say that a good presidential decision is one in which the President is not surprised at what happened after that decision was made, that he has been informed, that he is going to get this kind of flak or that kind of resistance. For our discussion purposes, when we talk about a good decision, the system is designed to keep him from being surprised. He's the one who makes the choice. And he may get enormous resistance; it be unpopular, or whatever. I think we have to keep that notion in mind. If the system worked, it worked not in the sense that he made a politically masterful decision or that he made one with marvelous consequences, but when he made it he knew what was likely to happen in many different areas, most of which were not immediately obvious prior to the decision. He didn't—

**Donald H. Rumsfeld:** A staffing system should get things to the President in an orderly way so he knows what's going to happen and makes a judgment. But he's perfectly capable of making a wrong judgment.

**Jerry H. Jones:** The point I was trying to make about the staffing system is not that it kills things but that somebody's off-the-wall idea had to run the hurdles so that if it ever got done—for example, I think the vice president's idea on that big \$100 billion oil thing [1975 energy independence policy proposal] was a classic example of a bad decision that went through the hurdles, and he decided in favor of it, and it was a bad decision.

**Herbert Stein:** Well, the system that's being described here by many of its practitioners as being substantively neutral and with respect to outcomes—that it's just a way of making sure that the President knows everything he's supposed to know. What people worry about the system is whether the custodians of the system are using their position astride the channels of communication to influence the outcome in a way that they are not legitimately expected to do.

**Connor:** Herb [Stein], that is a valid concern.

**James T. Lynn:** But I will say to you, Herb, the monumental step forward in this process, in my judgment, is that if the people in the White House, or in OMB, know—when they've done the

consultative job, and they've gotten the views of the various shops, and they're trying to put the distillate of that, the pros and cons, options, facts, and everything else in the paper—that that paper is going to be reviewed, or can be reviewed, by the cabinet heads, it creates a discipline against tilting the paper that is very, very good.

**Stein:** Well, this back and forth is not endless. There is the final answer. Somebody has the last word. And, of course, there's—I guess I think of the OMB a little differently from the others because I think of OMB as—

**Lynn:** Evil. [*laughter*]

**Stein:** No, I think of them as having a legitimate substantive role. They *are* the watchdogs of the money, and they are the people who are charged with assessing costs and benefits and so on. I wouldn't consider them to be a part of the problem. Well, I never knew what to think of John Ehrlichman [Nixon's Domestic Affairs Advisor, 1969–73], whether he was a substantive decision-maker or whether he was part of the process of getting papers in and out. And, well, it's a confusion.

**Richard B. Cheney:** But aren't you always going to have the problem, and it's merely a matter of degree depending on who's actually manning the system. Those people—which includes almost everybody in the administration who deals with the President through that process—are going to ask themselves the question of whether or not the process has integrity. Most of the time he's not going to get 100 percent response. That is to say, the chairman of CEA, or the secretary of treasury, or the secretary of HUD, the head of OMB, is going to put something through that system and it's going to come back modified. He's going to get half a loaf because of the considerations which will have been added to his views, and the President will make a decision that takes them all into account.

The danger of not having a system, seems to me, is that it's not a matter of the cabinet secretary maliciously not having a presidential perspective—he's got the perspective of the cabinet secretary. The secretary of state gets paid to worry about our international political relationships, not our domestic political considerations. And unless you've got a system, you end up with all your specialists who are part of the process, that the only guy who's got an overview, is aware of what's going on in every area, is the President. And he's the only one who can make the decision. But if you follow the spokes-of-the-wheel model instead of the pyramid model, I would argue, and have before, that everybody in the White House with very few exceptions is a specialist, not a generalist. And that if you took and asked the people who served President Ford in those senior spots how much of his [Ford's] time is devoted to their substantive policy area—economic or national security or whatever it was—and added up those percentages, you'd get 300 or 400 percent. None of them know everything else he's doing except for those people who man that system, who see all the paper and see all the people and have a sensitivity and an awareness to his view of the world. And it's not a matter of using the process to get a specific policy outcome that the manager of the process wants to have. It's a matter of knowing that when something comes in from the international side that there's something else going on in the domestic area and that the two need to be meshed.

**Stein:** Well, that's the ideal description of the system. What I'm trying to get at is whether that is the real description of the system.

**Cheney:** Depends on the people in the system.

**Stein:** Sure, there's a very great demand on the self-restraint and responsibility of the people who are playing the role—

**Connor:** That's exactly where you come out. In the final analysis, the presidency depends on character and personality as well as institution. In the end, you can either corrupt any institution or you create an institution that can prevent bad things from happening by preventing anything from happening. That's your dilemma. In the end, it is the people who make the system work. Whether it be the President or the people who work for him, it is their character you are talking about. Do they want to corrupt the system or don't they?

**Rumsfeld:** But there's a correcting mechanism, Herb [Stein]. To the extent an individual standing astride that system lacks the integrity or views his job differently from one that would see that the President gets that information and can make the judgment, as opposed to biasing the system himself, it gets around pretty fast. Then there's a much greater premium for people to circumvent the system, and then he is no longer sitting astride the system. On the other hand, 99 percent of the time I didn't offer an opinion. But I mean, if you take something like this energy independence agency that was proposed, I finally walked in and told the President I felt so strong about it that he just had to know, and I wanted to submit a separate memo on it. It looked like it was going to happen, and I've been sitting there kind of running it through in a nice objective way. Jim Connor was in on that—and it boggled my mind how strongly I felt against it. And so I just walked in and said, look, I'm going to come around the side and tell you how strongly I feel about it. But I did not bias the system.

**Stein:** I think that's an open process.

**Rumsfeld:** But I didn't communicate my opposition to everyone else in the system.

**Herbert J. Storing:** There are two aspects of this question, going back partly to what Dick Cheney said. One is the question of fidelity on the part of the people who are running it, and the other is the question of whether the system itself somehow has certain consequences. I take it that the kind of argument that Hess represents is a concern that, quite apart from the fidelity of the people who are running it or their devotion to the presidential view, and objectivity, and so forth, there is something about that system that is a hindrance. And one of the things that Dick Cheney said that tended to support that, it seemed to me, because you made the observation that most of that large and growing staff in the White House are in fact specialists, like the department people, and yet—

**Unidentified Speaker:** Is that bad?

**Storing:** Well, I don't know, except that presumably the purpose of the White House staff—presumably the overall purpose is to formulate and support a presidential view. If you have a huge and growing staff, the massive portion of which is a reflection of the same departmental or

partial views that you have at the department level, you do wonder whether you've only brought your problems up and given them another level.

**Cheney:** But I would argue, Herb [Storing], that to the extent you get specialists in the White House, it is a reflection of the enormous complexity of the issues that the President has to deal with and the enormous malorganization, misorganization, whatever you want to call it, in the federal government. In other words, Brent Scowcroft isn't there as a representative of the Defense Department, or the State Department, or the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. He's there because there are a whole set of issues that involve all of those people, and the director of the CIA doesn't have the perspective of the secretary of defense. And somebody's got to pull those together and make sure all those views are represented and then go to the President.

. . . [inaudible] . . .

**Lynn:** He's a specialist in your perfect world and Steve Hess's perfect world in part. The perfect world is that each cabinet officer who has all the qualities you would want to have and that cabinet officer takes the final look at the paper before it goes across the President's desk, notwithstanding the time pressures on that cabinet officer to give speeches, to interview with the press, to testify and everything else. That person, when he has something in housing, or energy, or whatever it is, goes about calling his fellow cabinet officers together, and they hammer it out, and they come up with an agreement as to what should come in the paper. And that cabinet officer is going to be able to draw it all together and put a paper together. In other words, whichever one had the lead, that Henry Kissinger's going to call, or Don Rumsfeld is going to call Earl Butz [Secretary of Agriculture, 1971–76] and say, "Now look, fellows, we've got to get together and we've got to get a paper for the President."

Now, I'd like to work toward that kind of cabinet officer—who is "straight up" no matter what kind of special interest group pressure he's got and ignores the fact that he's measured by the public on how much more money he's spending. You are a favorite with the interest group if you got more money, period. That's all that counts. Not that the programs worked better; you got more money and you got more programs. You're innovative, bold, ambitious. That means new ideas, new spending. Let's face it, that's been so since the Depression. Since the Depression at least, that's been the attitude. Program-a-minute club.

Now I think everyone will agree, you don't want to have 40 papers going in to the President. He hasn't got time to read them. In other words, the alternative thing you could do here to get cabinet input is to have each cabinet officer write his own paper; don't insist on them getting together on the papers; and have that pile of papers, 20 of them, come into the President; and ask the President of the United States to plow through 20 papers all in different lengths, none addressing the same issue on the same page, not meshing on the arguments, whether policy considerations or political considerations.

**Rumsfeld:** Not eliminating fact uncertainties.

**Lynn:** That's right, not even stating the facts. So now you come to the point, gee, wouldn't it be nice if you had one paper for the President. Now where that process can get wrecked and ruin a President can be that whoever is preparing that paper truly is at the top of a pyramid. And I get

worried about this pyramid versus spokes of the wheel because we didn't have a pyramid system in the Ford White House by way of the substantive input. The only pyramid we're talking about is in the area of, to some extent, access to the President, to a very limited extent, and that doesn't include cabinet officers. But every interest group in the world wants to see him, and there's got to be some kind of control valve that helps the President in that regard.

**Cheney:** No, but let's—

**Lynn:** Now wait a minute.

**Cheney:** —focus on the decision-making process.

**Lynn:** But on the decision making process, it wasn't a pyramid.

**Cheney:** It was a pyramid in the sense that there was only one spoke through which the paper was to go.

**Lynn:** But the preparation of the paper, the oral discussion, and everything else was fully participatory.

**Cheney:** We have semantic problems.

**Rumsfeld:** Jim [Lynn], the distinction, though, is the one that the President addressed in the transition team. When I came in he addressed it, and it was that, while he would have multiple sources of information in and up and around, that there would be a single channel for decision-making and that would be the staff system.

. . . [Inaudible] . . .

**James H. Cavanaugh:** I just think there's another distinction between the two presidencies. One is that Mr. Nixon apparently had two or three people on his staff that he had great confidence in, that he delegated a great amount of decision-making to. And although they maintained a pyramid system, and a staffing system, and a system that ensured that all points of views from cabinet members were reviewed, that from time to time certain staff members made decisions on behalf of the President without a lot of direct presidential involvement. That apparently was Mr. Nixon's desire and way of organizing his White House. I think, on the other hand, with Mr. Ford there was a great view in terms of not only spokes of the wheel and having access, even though the decision process went through the staff secretary, but that he wanted to be more a part of the decision-making process and in fact wanted to make more decisions on key policy differences between members of the cabinet and between the staff.

**Lynn:** But even where he made the decision, you've got to refine that a little bit. What I found, in the Nixon years, was that he would make decisions. But the question was, whose views were known when he made them. In other words, he did delegate a number of decisions in two different senses. One, he didn't even want to get involved in them, and the person would be able to say that this is the decision of the White House. But in other cases, the oral discussion, *he* made the decision, but it was on the basis of having read the papers, which on the whole were well done—to the extent I ever got to see them—and then would have oral conversation with just

the staff in close to him. Now if you were out there in the boonies, the way you learn to work that system was, and if they basically trusted you—the people that were discussing it with President Nixon—then the trick was for you to find the right opportunities to get in close to that staff person who *was* going to talk to the President so that your views would be known. That's a very ad hoc way of getting your way if you're a cabinet officer. I think I was fairly effective at it, though.

**Cheney:** Who's going to make the judgment about which system though is good and which one is bad? Ultimately, it's got to be the President.

**Lynn:** That's right.

**Cavanaugh:** Exactly.

**Cheney:** And if he chooses not to talk to anybody to make a decision, that's his prerogative. I'm reluctant to get into a situation where we—there's implicit criticism in talking about the way the Nixon system worked sometimes or the way you talk about not having seen the papers when they went in, or that he sat down and didn't consult with you, the cabinet members, but consulted with a small number of staff. I really think that's a decision that only he can make.

. . . [Inaudible] . . .

**Lynn:** I'm not saying anything's moral or amoral. I'm saying, what system for the country will best fit, and I'm saying that no matter how good, it does involve the personality of the person who is President and what that person is comfortable with. But there are enough things, it seems to me from my own experience of eight years in the government, where it serves the public interest for those views to be heard.

**Cavanaugh:** The institution of the presidency in terms of what we're talking about indicates that a President can develop his system, and if he's comfortable with that system, that's the system that's going to be in operation. Right?

**Lynn:** But I'm saying that if the consequences of the system are bad, then that's not a very good system. Or are you saying [inaudible]—

**Rumsfeld:** There tends to be a criticism of the system when in fact the criticism probably ought to have gone to the decisions being made by the President if a person disagreed.

**Storing:** That's possible, although that in a way is exactly one of the issues—I mean, whether that's true, or whether on the other hand there is this process of bureaucratization, or centralization, or whatever, that really had a kind of independent life.

**Rumsfeld:** I can take dozens of things that were highly criticized in the press or by cabinet officers in both administrations as the fact that people tend not to want to criticize the President. And they blame it on Ehrlichman, or they blame it on the staff in the White House, or they blame it on the system or the procedures used, or they blame it on OMB, when in point of the fact it was working exactly the way the President wanted it to, doing exactly what he wanted, and he may be very happy to have that buffer out serving as a lightning rod for him.



**Storing:** I think this should be linked up to something maybe we could talk a little more about after lunch, which is the question of implementation. As a matter of fact, I'm not a Hess advocate, but one of Hess's points, of course, is that—most of you people talk in terms of decision-making, by which you've meant deciding what the policy is going to be, generating the ideas, and all the rest of that. And as a couple of people indicated earlier, a weakness seems to have been at the level of implementation. One of Hess's points is that this process of building this big system of decision-making at the policy level has, he claims, resulted in a kind of ossification which has led, on the one hand, to the White House taking responsibility for implementation but without the capacity for it.

**Connor:** Two points, one to follow up on Don [Rumsfeld]. It is not only in our system. In the old imperial Russian system the czar was good, but he had bad advisors around him. In every political system, the people want to believe in their leaders. They have to believe in their leader. So instead of wrestling with the hard questions of character, we talk about systems. We like to seek comfort in systems and mechanisms that can be changed to protect us. And nobody in this country or elsewhere wants to come down and confront the question mentioned, and somebody was going to mention it sooner or later, the huge and growing White House staff.

**Storing:** I don't think I said "huge." I think I said "large."

**Connor:** Well, I want to take this opportunity to—

**Joseph M. Bessette:** We have a record.

**Rumsfeld:** This can be released to the public. *[laughter]*

**Connor:** Steve Hess, [Thomas E.] Tom Cronin [*The Presidential Advisory System*, 1969; *The Presidency Reappraised*, 1974], and several other people with less qualifications have developed marvelous theories about the imperial presidency on the basis of size of the White House staff and budgets. The only problem with their theories is that if anybody ever took the trouble to look, and I did, you cannot build a case on the imperial presidency by either looking at numbers of people or budgets of the White House. The greatest case of all is FDR ran the White House with 45 people. That's total nonsense. He did not run the White House with 45 people. He ran it with somewhere around 200 people. Kennedy ran it with a top number of 476; Johnson, 497, but probably about half again that much.

Nixon had one peak at 620 but generally was in the high 500s. Ford got it under 500; he actually did cut it. But if we are making arguments about an imperial presidency, and those arguments are based on either size of the White House budget or numbers of people on the White House staff, you'd better forget it. You cannot document that proposition. And every one of these arguments starts with the assertion that a small group of people once was the nonimperial presidency—not in the modern memory.

**Cavanaugh:** Which makes the case again, it's not the system or in this case the size of the staff or the budget. But in large part, it's the man who sits in the Oval Office.

**Connor:** That really is the point I want to make. You can argue that there is an imperial presidency, you can argue greater roles of the President in the system, but you have to argue that

from external factors—how the media treats Presidents, how that’s changed over time, what is expected of Presidents, what is the nation looking to him for. Those are the kinds of questions that are worth discussing if you’re discussing an imperial presidency versus some other role. But theories which depend on numbers of people and how they’re organized around the President I think are, first of all, factually wrong, and I think even in terms of how human nature works they’re likely to be wrong.

**Storing:** Nobody to my knowledge has ever done a good fair accounting of that, that took into effect the detailees and other things of that sort.

**Connor:** Well, anybody here that wants it, I will give them one, every year from 1934 on.

**Storing:** Very good, I’ll bear that in mind.

**James W. Ceaser:** There’s a certain number of points. One thing, in preparing, I read not only Hess but [Francis] Bacon, and he made this comment on counsel. He said, “It’s of singular use to princes” —I supposed you could say Presidents—“if they take the opinions of their council separately and together for private opinion is more free and opinion before others is more reverent.” And I think the “individual” element represents the spokes of the wheel; “before others” represents the pyramid. And even if you would agree on your system, that there is not an element attempting to prevent the opinions from coming to the President, still I think you could say that the quality of the advice that reaches the President is going to be different. The staff may have a different view of risk than the President. They may want to take a good deal more time in seeing that these proposals are ones that he should hear. And there is a question also of what is encouraged by way of initiatives from people when they offer ideas. I can’t believe—this following Hess—that the type of presidency that Johnson or Roosevelt might have had with the sort of slapdash ideas coming out, I can’t believe that that would come out of a pyramid system.

**Unidentified Speaker:** We had plenty of slapdash ideas. *[laughter]*

**Lynn:** Are you arguing whether that’s good or bad?

**Ceaser:** It may well depend on what’s required at the time and what the President wants, but I think there is some correlation between organization and output of ideas even if you assume the men in the system of the pyramid are trying to be fair. Then I had a couple of other comments, one about coordination in the cabinet. The idea was expressed that the function of the staff is to coordinate because the cabinet always represents special interests, and therefore you have to have someone having presidential views. And I wonder that if to some extent that’s not perpetrated by the system in which the staff assumes that function and the cabinet is relegated to the outskirts and *[inaudible]*—

**Lynn:** You misconstrued what I was saying. In an ideal system, your cabinet officers would have a presidential perspective. This is one of the reasons why I think Steve (Hess) has opened the debate to a very important issue—the qualities of the cabinet officers and what you’re really looking for in the cabinet officer. The qualities of the cabinet officers ought to drive the system of organization in the White House to a very large degree. But what I’m saying to you is at least based on historic fact. The historic fact is that most people appointed to cabinet officers after a period of time for one reason or another go inward toward their own missions under the battering

that they take constantly by interest groups. And even if they try to be objective, they are no longer capable of it. And it is the hardest thing you fight, day after day, when you sit out there in the department headquarters—to be negative, and you are always negative, if you don't want to spend the last buck they, the special interest groups, want to spend. The most impossible job in the world, probably, is to be the consumer assistant to the President. The only way you could win with a consumer group is to do the thing that the way-out-on-the-rim, most flaky consumer advocate wants. Because that's the only press that will be there.

**Ceaser:** Well, I can make another point, that the Ash Commission [President's Advisory Council on Executive Organization, 1969–71] addressed this point and said maybe the problem is in the structure of the cabinet.

**Lynn:** What did he [Roy Ash, head of the commission] mean by that?

**Ceaser:** Well, he suggested that it's because the cabinet is spread out and organized along interest group lines without having the coordination built into the cabinet so that the cabinet officer would be forced to do the coordinating.

**Lynn:** There is no way; that is one of the greatest fallacies to mankind. And if I were to criticize one of the things the new administration is doing it is this fantastic overblown priority given to reorganization. I think there's room for reorganization, and it can be useful. But there's no way on the very things that Don [Rumsfeld] was talking about in today's world and get even close to ever putting in any one department or agency, no matter how well you reorganize them, all of the competing missions, goals, and priorities that will bear on the major problems of this country. Whether they are energy, whether they are economic issues, whether they're national security, whether they're housing programs, welfare programs—tell me any organizational structure that will not require coordinated task force approaches cutting across the departments. There is no—

**Ceaser:** The Defense Department was originally different departments, and I think that the institution of—

**Lynn:** It can be improved, but to think it will ever get rid of the need for coordination is just absolutely false.

**Cheney:** If you had absolute total authority to organize it any way you want it tomorrow, you could not come up with a structure that's going to solve the problem of the need of a President for staff to help him sort through—

**Rumsfeld:** One thing you could do is to take the people who have served in the departments and have them serve some time in OMB and in the White House, and have the people who have worked in the White House serve some time in the departments and agencies, at least for a period of time.

**Robert A. Goldwin:** I think Jim [Lynn] is right that the problem is so fundamental that you can rearrange things but you can't get rid of it.

**Connor:** You shouldn't ever be able to get rid of it. You're talking about issues like energy—

**Lynn:** Competing goals and objectives, always.

**Connor:** —but the real question is not putting a number of boxes that have energy in their title in the same department. The critical energy issues in this country are tradeoffs between energy demands and environment, national security, and the economy. And you're not going to have all those three things coordinated under energy. Do you even want to?

. . . [Inaudible] . . .

**Goldwin:** Take one example that was a problem early in the Ford administration and persists: the food reserves, food assistance, and food sales. However the government is organized, that subject is going to have problems that are dealt with by Treasury, State Department, Agriculture, Commerce, and OMB. However you're organized, there's going to be a budget problem, a foreign policy–diplomacy–alliance problem, a balance of payments problem, and so on. You couldn't imagine some *one* agency that would take care of all those things because if it did, then it would have to have subordinate agencies that would immediately begin to reflect the same responsibilities and therefore biases.

**Unidentified Speaker:** But then the cabinet minister would be the mediator.

. . . [Inaudible] . . .

**Goldwin:** It gets back to the point that Dick Cheney was making about generalists and specialists. There must be someone who feels that it is his responsibility to take care of the balance of payments problem and to worry about whether we're going to get any revenue from shipping our food abroad. There must be someone who feels responsible for that, who feels the pressure for it, and who will make the case as persuasively as possible to the President when a decision has to be made about food sales or food assistance. So that it's inevitable that there will be specialists. Otherwise, the government isn't going to work, and people aren't going to feel responsible for things that are of very great importance. But since the President has to take into account in a general way all of these elements, he'll be alone in thinking of it that way if he discusses it only with cabinet members. So he wants to have around him a few people who have the responsibility to see these problems from *his* viewpoint. Therefore, I think it's inevitable, however you organize, that there will be a White House staff with some kind of second guessing of the highest constitutional officers, the cabinet members, and there will be that kind of resentment. Cabinet members don't act presidential and say, "I know this would be very good for our diplomatic relations with a nation, but I understand OMB's concern about the cost of giving this food away, so let's not do it."

**Lynn:** No, occasionally it happens.

. . . [Inaudible] . . .

**Goldwin:** But he's got responsibilities to his department.

**Storing:** Gentlemen, I'm sorry, we have a logistics requirement. If you want time for a drink before lunch, we have to stop now—and I trust that you do.

[END SECOND SESSION]