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The Obama White House May Be a Crowded Mess

There will be four people in my old office.

By [KARL ROVE](#)

On the campaign trail, Barack Obama criticized Washington for being "obsessed with the perpetual campaign." As president he is the first occupant of the Oval Office to give his director of political affairs -- who coordinates the president's involvement with his party and other campaign related activities -- an office in the West Wing.

Many Americans may assume that the president's entire staff is in the West Wing. It's not. The West Wing is actually a very small place, so the vast number of people who work "at the White House" actually have offices across the street at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building (EEOB).

Under Mr. Obama, the political director won't be in the EEOB, where other presidents have placed him. He'll occupy a West Wing office usually given to the head of presidential personnel. That's a sign of the importance of politics for Team Obama.

This is one of many of Mr. Obama's changes to the management structure of the White House that will likely undermine his stated aims and create a more centralized and possibly incoherent policy process.

Another first to have a West Wing office is the incoming secretary of Health and Human Services, Tom Daschle. Once sworn in, he will be the first domestic cabinet secretary to have a desk in the most coveted office space in government -- to use in his other job as director of the White House Office of Health Reform.

This dual role centralizes policy-making inside the White House because it allows Mr. Daschle to displace the Domestic Policy Council and the National Economic Council on developing health-care policy.

Tapping Carol Browner as climate czar also centralizes decision making. Her role will displace the leadership of the Council on Environmental Quality and diminish the influence of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Aides say Mr. Obama believes the cabinet structure is "outdated." His appointment of czars to oversee technology, automotive and environmental policies underscores this belief because each new czar weakens cabinet and agency involvement in policy decisions. The White House has always had overlapping lines of authority, which creates a certain amount of conflict while everyone figures out who really has clout. But Mr. Obama has added to the confusion by making declarations that multiple people in his cabinet or on his staff have more authority and responsibility than their predecessors. In addition to creating a protracted power struggle within the West Wing, Mr. Obama's management decisions may lead to more intrusive, larger government policies gaining traction. Why? Because left-leaning aides will be unimpeded by the White House's budget director or cabinet secretaries as they push new policies.

It is rumored that as many as 160 people will be in the West Wing under Mr. Obama. Under President George W. Bush

there were about 60. My old, modest-sized office has been carved into four cubicles. This reduces the space for ad hoc meetings in personal offices, where so much West Wing work once took place.

The space crunch comes because Mr. Obama has moved several positions that once had offices in the EEOB into the West Wing. These include public liaison, intergovernmental affairs and political affairs. This reflects the importance he places on these offices' marketing efforts.

Space is also short because the ranks of senior staff have been increased. There is a chief of staff, of course, but also two deputy chiefs, and three senior advisers. Some senior aides now have chiefs of staff of their own. That is new.

All of this matters because management structure affects decision-making and determines the range and quality of voices the president hears. That impacts policy outcomes.

Mr. Obama's changes could overload Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. As power that was once diffused to cabinet officers is centralized in the White House, Mr. Emanuel will have to make more decisions and referee more turf wars than his predecessors. This will test his skills and likely inject chaos into the policy process as he prioritizes the decisions he can reasonably make.

Mr. Obama's tendency to work late into the night will also pose problems. Politico.com reports that the White House staff is "preparing for a return to long nights, heavy weekend shifts." Requiring a senior staff that meets at 7:30 a.m. to work until 11 p.m. or 12 a.m. will quickly cause burnout and diminish the quality of advice and oversight.

Mr. Obama and his team are confident that they can keep the pace of a campaign going in the West Wing, which no one before them has done. That intoxicating idea will fade. The question is how they will deal with the challenges created by their organization of the West Wing's policy-making apparatus.

Mr. Rove is the former senior adviser and deputy chief of staff to President George W. Bush.

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