Inside the Oval Office

An Interview with Andrew Hill Card,
Former Chief of Staff to George W. Bush, 43rd President of the United States of America

Andrew Hill Card

EDITORS' NOTE *Andrew Card served as White House Chief of Staff for then President George W. Bush from January 2001 to April 2006. Card got his start in politics serving in local government and then in the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1975 to 1983. He ran unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination for Governor of Massachusetts in 1982. Card first served in the West Wing under President Ronald Reagan, as Special Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental Affairs and subsequently as Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of Intergovernmental Affairs. From 1989 to 1992, Card served in President George H. W. Bush's administration as Assistant to the President and Deputy Chief of Staff. From 1992 until 1993, Card served as the 11th U.S. Secretary of Transportation under President George H. W. Bush. From 1993 to 1998, Card was President and Chief Executive Officer of the American Automobile Manufacturers Association. From 1999 until his selection as President Bush's Chief of Staff, Card was General Motors' Vice President of Government Relations. In November 2000, Card was appointed as Chief of Staff for then President-Elect George W. Bush upon Bush's January 2001 inauguration, a position from which he resigned in 2006. He currently serves on the board of directors of Union Pacific Corporation. Card graduated from the University of South Carolina with a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering. He also attended the United States Merchant Marine Academy and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.*

Your tenure as Chief of Staff under President George W. Bush was a long one. How did you define the role and your relationship with the President?

First of all, I don't think I would have been able to give you a credible answer if I had not had previous experience working in the White House. I served under every chief of staff who served Ronald Reagan (James A. Baker III, Donald Regan, Howard Baker, Ken Duberstein) and George Herbert Walker Bush (John Sununu, Sam Skinner, James A. Baker III). I was informed by an interaction with all of those personalities. I came to recognize that the President gives personality to the executive branch and for our nation around the world, but it's the chief of staff that gives personality to the workings of the White House. I'm not sure that I would have understood that had I not worked in the White House under different chiefs of staff. So I was informed by my experience and I learned much about leadership styles, management roles, and decision making working under all of those chiefs of staff.

Second is the job itself. Former White House staffer to three Presidents and Harvard Professor Roger B. Porter – an expert on White House organization - described the responsibilities of the chief of staff as involving the care and feeding of the President, policy formulation, and marketing and selling. Of all of those, the care and feeding is the biggest challenge of the job; but if it is done right, the public doesn't recognize it. This incorporates everything from scheduling, the logistics involved in travel coordination of Air Force One, helicopters, motorcades, event planning, and everyday household living. I also made sure the President had time to eat, sleep, and be merry: to talk to his wife or one of the daughters; to see a movie; to read a book; or just to contemplate. So the care and feeding responsibility is a very significant part of the job.

Policy formulation is the part of the job to which most Americans pay attention. This doesn't require as much attention from the chief of staff as the myth suggests, because the President attracts the best and the brightest, and almost every one of them has a type A personality. For the most part, you're not dealing with people who are reluctant to express themselves. The chief of staff's responsibility is to make sure the President is getting wise counsel that is well-informed, that is not monolithic, and that it is presented in time for him to make use of it. Most of the policy people in the White House are hired because they have excellent tunnel vision. They're experts, and so when they're ready, they assume the world is ready. The chief of staff needs to have good peripheral vision and sometimes has to let policy makers know the time is not right because something else more important is going on at the moment. Managing the type A personalities, the information they present, and the calendar of consideration is a big part of the job.

Presidents should only make tough decisions; if they're making easy decisions, the chief of staff hasn't done his or her job. Chances are, the President will only make a tough decision after he has had the benefit of wise counsel, then stretched beyond the environments of the White House to get other wise counsel, read the briefing papers, done some other homework, contemplated, prayed, and slept on it. Then a President will usually walk into the Oval Office early in the morning and tell the chief of staff the decision. But if the President makes a decision and nobody knows about it, did the President make a decision? So the chief of staff's job is to communicate the decision, which means marketing and selling – taking that decision and communicating it to the right people, at the right time, and in the right way. It's not just communicating it to the American people or to the Congress or to the UN or to another world leader; it's also communicating it to the people who work in the White House or the Cabinet. These type A personalities may bristle at the decision and want another run at the resolution because it is not what they recommended. The chief of staff's job is to take the President's decision – made with optimism – and communicate it to the right people at the right time with the hope that you get a result that lives up to the President's expectations.

There must have been decisions that you didn't personally agree with. Is it hard to deal with these?

No. I really do respect George W. Bush. I respect how he makes decisions. I know him to be a truly compassionate conservative. Although I didn't agree with every decision he made, I respected how he made every decision. And his decisions were not my decisions – they

were his decisions. A chief of staff is not a prime minister; a chief of staff is a staffer responsible for managing the White House staff. The chief of staff also has two other jobs: number one is to make sure the President and his family are well served; the second job sometimes gets in conflict with the first, and that is to protect the institution of the Presidency. It is likely that there are only two people in the White House who worry about the institution of the Presidency: the chief of staff and the White House counsel. In that context, I would have zero qualms standing up and pointing out when anyone, including the President, is setting a bad precedent for the office of the President.

As soon as I became the President's Chief of Staff, I also had to fight a natural tendency to want to be his friend. I have seen what happened when a President had a tough time making the right decision because he didn't want to hurt his friend. So I made a decision that I would resist that unbelievable tug to want to be the President's friend. Now he was my friend and I didn't want to let him down. But as soon as I became a staffer, I served at his "pleasure for the time being," not for my pleasure or as his burden.

Do you believe that some years from now, there will be a different perception of the impact that the most recent Bush administration made?

I truly believe that history will prove more respectful of President George W. Bush's tenure than current bias. I am very grateful for the leadership that President Bush provided to this country. I never saw ulterior motive with anything President Bush decided. He was not driven to philosophical or political decisions that were inconsistent with what he believed, in good conscience, were in the best interests of the United States. So my respect is sincere. I am proud of the leadership he gave. I think America will come to realize that the contributions are much greater than they realize. The bias of today's short-term memory has been driven not by the President's actions, but by those who were seeking to interpret it with bias. An objective look, which is impossible for us to give in contemporaneous times, will show that the President's decision making was appropriate. He kept his oath to protect us, and he is worthy of great respect.

This February, we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the start of former President George H.W. Bush's tenure as President of the United States. George H.W. Bush was President for 1,460 days, and his contributions to economic and domestic policy still provide a foundation for this country to stand on, and most people have forgotten about that. I think the same thing will be said in 20 years about George W. Bush.

What lessons from your roles in government do you share when you speak to the next generations of leaders?

I have learned that leadership is all about making decisions. In the legislative branch, almost every tough decision is telegraphed for a long time in advance of being made. You debate it, it goes to a committee, it goes to another committee, it's changed, and then you vote and you are most often not the "decider." A President is the decider, and most often, time doesn't permit the luxury of long deliberation. Even when decisions fall under an umbrella of philosophy that people would expect to be easy, tough decisions are required. For instance, you can make the decision to cut taxes, which is a big decision but not that hard. However, to decide which taxes to cut is more difficult, and it gets even more difficult to decide which compromises on tax cuts to make in order to gain the needed votes of senators or congressmen.

I watched the President make really tough decisions, even in the context of an easy philosophical decision. True leaders have to do that. In guiding the staff as they counseled the President on policy decisions, I imposed what I call the test of the four P's. When they were ready with their policy recommendation, I'd ask them what philosophical Principle would be addressed by this policy. Sometimes they could identify it, sometimes they couldn't.

Next, I would ask them to identify the People who will benefit. Not the philosophers, not the academics, but which people will benefit. This is relatively easy to do, but is not something a lot of policy makers think about when they're setting the policy.

Then I'd ask them to identify Partners who will not benefit by the policy. but who will acknowledge that it is the right thing to do. Who are the partners we can expect to educate, to solicit, and then to echo that this policy is right?

Finally, I would ask if this policy should be a Presidential decision, because if it's just a government decision, somebody else can be making it. So that was my policy test of the four P's: Principle, People, Partners, and Presidential.

In interviewing every Presidential appointment to a White House job, I mentioned the test of the four P's. But even more importantly, I also stressed ethics. I told each individual that ethics was more important than their job. I would remind them, if their conscience becomes troubled, they have a responsibility to let somebody know about it. And it's their own conscience that matters. It's not just the conscience of the law, or the conscience of the regulation – it's their own conscience. I don't know what someone's test will be as to whether their conscience is bothering them. It might be a sleepless night, or heavy heart. Whatever the sign, I asked them not to be afraid to pay attention to their conscience.

What were the most significant changes that you witnessed during your long political career?

The two biggest changes over my political experience of 25 years – I came to the White House in August of 1983 – are irreversible. The first is more challenging than the second, but the second is becoming more challenging and will overtake the first. When I first entered the political and policy arena, media was centered around print journalism and three networks. There was a cadence to the news cycle. During the Reagan administration I even remember the press secretary announcing around 4:30 PM that "the lid was on," meaning no more news that day. Today with the competition of so many cable outlets, radio talk shows, the Internet, and opportunistic bloggers, the news cycle is never-ending. The competitive pressure to fill time and space with news has more news being made.

Also, when I first entered the arena there was an unwritten, ethical rule of journalism that you didn't run a story unless you had at least two confirming sources. Today, the pressure to have news relaxed the two-source expectation to one source, and eventually to just credible rumor. So now rumors tend to drive a lot of the news.

The second big change is in the way we communicate. When I first came to Washington, fax machines were just being introduced in the White House. We used IBM's electric typewriters and carbon paper. Special security rules dictated how one was to protect the corrector strip and typewriter ribbon. Carbon paper had to be shredded if it included classified information. If you had a computer, it was only to edit very large documents – it wasn't to communicate. We did most of our communication face to face or over a phone, with our voices. Now society communicates digitally with 0's and 1's. We use our thumbs on a BlackBerry more than we use our mouths, and what our thumbs produce never goes away. So we're dealing with a huge revelation of information that is not always fully accurate, but that will drive not only news, but that could drive policy. So I'm very nervous about it. I'm old school, and our laws are old school, but they're interpreted to cover the realities of communication today. It's illegal to tape a phone call in Washington, D.C. unless the parties all know about it. Yet, it is the interpreted law that if you record 0's and 1's, everybody can know about it. Words spoken don't linger except in memory. Digital dialogue remains no matter how raw. Today, the staff hired to work at the White House is addicted to the 0's and 1's, and they don't want a filter on it. My counsel is to be careful as you write, and before you send or Twitter. I did very little digital communicating during my tenure as Chief of Staff, because I didn't want to be thinking about the consequences of my thumbs hitting the wrong buttons.

Will you ever consider delving back into public service?

Absolutely. I feel very strongly about this. My grandmother had been a suffragette, and she had great influence on my life. My parents were very young when they were married. They were wonderful parents, and I got to share so much with them. But my grandmother inculcated me with the recognition that the greatest document in the history of the world, that is not one of faith, is our Constitution. It's really just an invitation, but it's an invitation that once accepted, becomes a tremendous obligation. We're the government of the people, but the people are not obligated to participate in the government; they're invited to participate in it. Citizens decide to run for office; citizens decide to vote; people decide to make a phone call, to send a letter, or to argue a point. So I was inculcated with the expectation that, since the Constitution is an invitation, I should accept the invitation to participate. I did. I would proudly answer the call again. ●