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# The People Behind the Presidential Bully Pulpit

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The People Behind the Presidential Bully Pulpit

by

Kara S. Alaimo

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the  
dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

### The People Behind the Presidential Bully Pulpit

by

Kara S. Alaimo

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“The People Behind the Presidential Bully Pulpit” argues that civil servants best serve the interests of both the President of the United States and the American people as public affairs officers in the Department of the Treasury. Using interviews conducted with political appointees who served as Treasury spokespeople during the administrations of Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush, civil servants who served in public affairs for the Treasury, and Treasury reporters who interacted frequently with the government officials, the study finds that civil servants better advance the goals of the President in the press than the political appointees personally selected by the President. This is the case because civil servants have greater knowledge of the policies they advocate and because reporters apply greater skepticism to the arguments of political appointees because reporters assume that appointees are always attempting to advance political agendas – a phenomenon this study calls the “appointee discount.” While scholars have previously argued that presidents accept the lower competence

of appointees in order to attain their greater loyalty, this study suggests that no such tradeoff exists. It finds that political appointees and civil servants leak information to the press that does not serve the interests of the President with roughly the same frequency. The study also finds that civil servants better serve the interests of the American people in such roles. The study finds that neither political appointees nor civil servants in the Treasury's public affairs department are conducting the "permanent campaign" to build support for the President that White House aides have been accused of practicing, by governing based upon public opinion polls and appealing to the emotions, as opposed to the reason, of the American people. However, political appointees are significantly more likely to withhold information requested by reporters than civil servants.

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## **Introduction**

### **The Politicization of the American Presidency**

Though the U.S. Constitution is silent on the subject of the bureaucracy, which did not grow until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in *The Federalist* #72 Alexander Hamilton laid out a dilemma for staffing the government that presidents have grappled with ever since.

On the one hand, Hamilton argued,

the actual conduct of foreign negotiations, the preparatory plans of finance, the application and disbursement of the public moneys in conformity to the general appropriations of the legislature, the arrangement of the army and navy, the directions of the operations of war – these, and other matters of a like nature, constitute what seems to be most properly understood by the administration of government. The persons, therefore, to whose immediate management these different matters are committed, ought to be considered as the assistants or deputies of the chief magistrate, and on this account, they ought to derive their offices from his appointment, at least from his nomination, and ought to be subject to his superintendence.

By this line of argument, presidents of the United States should rely heavily on political appointees – staffers who the chief executive personally appoints and is free to dismiss at any time.

On the other hand, Hamilton warned that the propensity of the president to reverse the policies of his predecessor, combined with “the influence of personal confidences and attachments, would be likely to induce every new President to promote a change of men to fill

the subordinate stations; and these causes together could not fail to occasion a disgraceful and ruinous mutability in the administration of the government.” (Hamilton, Madison and Jay 1987, 412-413). By this argument, presidents should rely more heavily on civil servants – staffers who enjoy protection from dismissal for political reasons and serve across administrations, bringing needed continuity and stability to the government.

The balance that American presidents have struck between appointees and civil servants has varied. President Andrew Jackson famously claimed that “the duties of all public officers are, or at least admit of being made, so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance” – and went on to create a vast spoils system to reward party supporters with government posts (Rourke 1984, 17). Calls for reform of the patronage system reached a crescendo following the 1881 assassination of President Garfield by a disappointed job seeker. In 1883, the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act created a civil service system to select employees for federal posts based upon the results of competitive exams and protect employees from being fired for political reasons.

However, modern-day presidents have shifted the pendulum back in the direction of Hamilton’s first hand. The number of federal political appointees increased steadily during the 1950s-1980s, while overall government employment decreased relative to the U.S. population (Richardson and Pfiffner 1999, 179). While the number of appointees has remained relatively stable since the 1980s, today, an incoming president fills almost 4,000 jobs – double the number of positions as during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lewis 2012, 587; Lewis 2011, 48-49). Scholars refer to the phenomenon of the increased number of political appointees serving in the federal government today as the “politicization” of the American presidency (Lewis 2008, 3).

While political appointments remain a tiny fraction of the federal workforce, the

American system nevertheless stands in marked contrast to that of nearly every other mature democracy. For example, an incoming British prime minister, German chancellor, or French president would make about 100-200 appointments (ibid., 2).

The increased use of appointment power is one part of a larger strategy pursued by American presidents since Nixon to exert increased control over the executive branch – an effort that Richard Nathan famously dubbed the “administrative presidency.” (Nathan 1983). Terry Moe has argued that the strategy is a rational response by presidents, who are faced with limited constitutional powers yet held responsible by the electorate for solving so many of their problems (1999, 147-148).

Presidents began to implement the strategy at a time when it became simultaneously harder yet more critical for them to utilize the government to achieve their aims. Since the New Deal era, presidents have increasingly assumed responsibility for managing the economy, national security, and broader domestic policy. The New Deal expansion of the federal government made it more difficult to manage the ballooning bureaucracy, leading President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Brownlow Committee to conclude that “the president needs help.” (1937, 5).

At the same time, the rise of divided government (in which the president and the majority of at least one house of Congress are members of opposite parties) has made it harder for presidents to achieve their goals legislatively (Rourke 1991, 114; Waterman 1989, 5). The 2013 government shutdown, in which the Republican House of Representatives battled the Democratic White House in an effort to delay or repeal the Affordable Care Act, is just one example of this conundrum.

The increased difficulty presidents have faced in harnessing the government to achieve

their goals came at a time when it was more critical than ever for them to do so. The decline of political parties and party loyalties and growth of primaries as venues for the selection of candidates led presidents to wage more individualized campaigns, replete with promises to the various groups forming their electoral coalitions.

Pfiffner has argued that, in order to keep fickle constituents happy, presidents must find a way to achieve greater control of the government so they can actually deliver on their electoral pledges (1999, 3). Moe has posited that the president's reelection prospects, personal standing, and historical legacy all depend upon his ability to govern. With such high stakes, it is no surprise that "to the extent he has the freedom to move in this direction, the president will find politicization irresistible. The appointment power is simple, readily available, and enormously flexible." (1999, 152). Of course, it is also possible that presidents may have been wary of extending their control too heavily, since with greater political power comes increased political vulnerability and reduced ability to blame other actors when things go wrong – which could explain why politicization leveled off in the 1980s.

Two key modern institutional changes speeded the politicization process. In 1953, President Eisenhower – who feared that the civil servants working when he came to office were too loyal to previous New Deal programs – created "Schedule C" positions, which allow the president and agency heads to hire appointees for confidential or policy-determining positions without congressional approval (Pfiffner 1996, 74). In 1978, under President Carter, the Civil Service Reform Act created the Senior Executive Service (SES) for the highest-level civil servants, allowing for up to ten percent of such positions to be filled by appointees and giving the president greater flexibility to re-assign such top-tier civil servants.

In addition to appointments, the administrative presidency also entails tools such as

centralizing government decision making in the White House, using the budget as a vehicle for policymaking, regulatory review, and the creation of new administrative agencies (Nathan 1983; Lewis and Moe 2010, 389; Howell and Lewis 2002). But scholars generally agree that the appointment power is the “most potent weapon” in the president’s administrative arsenal (Waterman 1989, 49).

Robert Maranto has noted that straightforward institutional demands have made it necessary for presidents to hire more appointees. The skyrocketing growth of interest groups, congressional staff, and media over the past several decades has led to increased demands by these groups for contact with the government. Liaising with such groups is a political task, which civil servants themselves seek to avoid (1998a, 7). But a principal reason that presidents have come to see appointments as so powerful is because appointees are generally assumed to have “a single-minded devotion to the president’s interest.” (Rudalevidge 2002, 11). President Clinton’s senior adviser George Stephanopoulos described his job this way: “doing the president’s bidding was my reason for being; his favor was my fuel.” (2000, 210).

On the other hand, much-maligned civil servants are assumed to be less responsive to the president. In *The American Presidency*, Clinton Rossiter suggested that members of the bureaucracy may be more of an impediment to the president than Congress itself. “Were the Presidents of the last fifty years to be polled on this question,” he claimed, “all but one or two, I am sure, would agree that the ‘natural obstinacy’ of the average bureau chief or commissioner or colonel was second only to the ‘ingrained suspicions’ of the average Congressman as a check on the President’s ability to do either good or evil. Several would doubtless go further to insist that the President’s hardest job is, not to persuade Congress to support a policy dear to his political heart, but to persuade the pertinent bureau or agency or mission, even when headed by men of

his own choosing, to follow his direction faithfully and transform the shadow of the policy into substance of a program.” (1987, 45).

The literature thus suggests that the increased use of political appointees allows the chief executive to harness the bureaucracy to work in support of his goals. By contrast, this study questions the conventional wisdom that politicization has benefited modern presidents by helping them achieve increased control over the executive branch.

### **The Lack of Evidence to Guide Presidential Staffing Decisions**

President Carter once said, “this stuff is boring.” (Lewis 2008, 219). (President Garfield might have begged to differ.) In reality, though, the question of how to staff the government is one of the most important choices the American people face. As Hugh Heclo has argued,

presidents and department heads make few choices that are more important than those concerning the type of people who will serve with them in the administration. In affecting the everyday work of government, these ... personnel selections add up to a cumulative act of choice that may be at least as important as the electorate’s single act of choice for president every four years. (1977, 88).

The people who staff the government, after all, are responsible for policies and decisions impacting the safety of America’s food, medicine, and environment; the regulation of the economy; and the country’s security and continued existence. Yet even at the founding of the nation, long before Americans looked to Washington, D.C. to solve so many of their problems, President Jefferson reported that “there is nothing I am so anxious about as good nominations, conscious that the merit as well as reputation of an administration depends as much on that as on

its measures.” (Labiner and Light 2001, 234).

To date, the absence of research available to guide presidents in their staffing decisions is truly remarkable – shocking, even. As Hecló has noted, the current system of presidential staffing is not a product of any rational process of study or consideration. Rather, it simply “emerged as a by-product of ... microcalculations of political advantage.” (1988, 39). As a result, each incoming presidential administration tends simply to start with the same number of appointees as the last administration, instead of analyzing *specific positions* to determine whether appointees or civil servants would best serve the president in such roles (Lewis 2008, 206). Of course, the short timeframe from election to Inauguration Day would make it difficult for any incoming administration to conduct systematic analysis. Yet the absence of scholarly direction would make it impossible even for a president attempting to make more informed decisions to do so based upon evidence and experience. This is because scholars have generally failed to provide presidents with the kind of research that could serve as guideposts.

The need for such scholarship has long been recognized. In 1985, the National Academy of Public Administration noted that “more attention must be paid to the development of criteria for determining where the country will be best served by a career executive and where by a political appointee.” (29). In 1999, Moe likewise found that “presidents and their advisers have a serious knowledge problem: even if they had the resources to impose any reforms they liked, they would not know how to design an institutional system optimally suited to presidential needs.” He noted that the social science of organizations is so underdeveloped that “no systematic body of knowledge is available to presidents – or anyone else for confidently linking alternative institutional designs to alternative sets of consequences. Presidents may know where they want to go, but science cannot tell them how to get there.” (149). In 2011, David E. Lewis

likewise concluded that, when it comes to government staffing decisions, “we know very little about the tradeoffs and where the ‘sweet spot’ is for appointee management, either to maximize the president’s interest or to optimize some general form of agency performance.” (60). The present study represents an effort to begin to correct this deficit.

Much previous scholarship, such as that of the Presidential Appointee Initiative, has focused on the highest-ranking political appointees. While useful in other respects, such work is less helpful in guiding presidential staffing decisions. There is no question that the positions of cabinet heads and assistant secretaries should be filled by appointees. The highest-ranking posts also tend to be created by Congress. However, over the past fifty years, much of the growth in appointees has come in Schedule C positions – those over which the president has the most control. It is here that presidents could easily swap civil servants for appointees. It is also here that research is most lacking. Such appointees are so little-studied that Lewis and Waterman have dubbed Schedule C and SES appointments to be the “invisible presidential appointments.” (2013, 35). I will begin to correct this imbalance by making Schedule C appointees a key focus of my research.

Many previous works – such as Lewis’ 2008 study of aggregate ratings of government programs and the surveys of the National Academy of Public Administration and Presidential Appointee Initiative – are also useful in providing a macro perspective of appointee competence and loyalty. But such works are less helpful in helping differentiate the specific agencies, environments and positions in which appointees better serve the president – and/or the people – vis a vis their careerist counterparts. The professional backgrounds and organizational goals of, for example, staff in technocratic agencies such as the Department of the Treasury, are likely to differ significantly from those of officials employed in social service agencies, such as the



Department of Health and Human Services, or regulatory agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency. As a result, we must be careful about drawing such sweeping generalizations.

I will therefore interview political appointees and civil servants who work in public affairs for the Treasury and its subsidiary bureaus, in order to determine which group serves as more effective and loyal advocates for the president – and what guideposts the results offer to presidential administrations regarding how to fill other positions and the wisdom of politicization.

### **Gatekeepers to Government Information**

Government public affairs officials were selected for this study because of their critical roles as gatekeepers to the majority of the information released by the executive branch. The framers of the Constitution were clear that they intended the American people to hold their elected representatives accountable. In order to do so, the American people require information about the state of the government and the economy. Jeremy Waldron has argued that the principle of accountability places an obligation on government leaders to provide such information *proactively* to the people, and in a form in which they understand (2014, 7). Of course, the framers indicated that it is also sometimes legitimate for the government to withhold information, and they did not explicitly name a right to information. However, it is also clear that citizens could not judge their government if key information about agency activities were withheld.

For example, the Declaration of Independence makes clear that governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” The intention of the Framers is also evident in *The Federalist* #51, authored by James Madison or Alexander Hamilton, which states that “a dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government.” (Hamilton,

Madison and Jay 1987, 320). Of course, citizens could not consent to government actions without knowing about them. The Constitutional mechanisms providing for a unitary executive and eligibility for re-election were also designed to foster the accountability of government leaders to the American people. (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1987, 344-345, 413, 405-406).

As a result, in arguing for a provision that both houses of the Legislature be required to publish their proceedings, on August 11, 1787, James Wilson noted that “the people have a right to know what their Agents are doing or have done.” (Farrand 1911, vol. 2, 260). James Madison, known as the “father of the Constitution,” elsewhere made his views on this subject more explicit. In his *Report on the Virginia Resolutions*, he wrote that the “right of freely examining public characters and measures, and of free communication among the people thereon ... has ever been justly deemed the only effectual guardian of every other right.” (1800). And in his Letter to W.T. Barry, he famously quipped that “popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both.” (1822).

Former Senator Thomas C. Hennings, Jr. also noted that the Preamble to the Constitution says that “We the People” establish the Constitution. According to Hennings, “since, under our theory of government, sovereignty resides in the people, it logically and necessarily follows that the people have a right to know what the Government – which they themselves established – is doing, and that government officials properly may interfere with the free exercise of that right only to the extent the people themselves consent. Thus, while it is not mentioned, the people’s right to know is an implicit part of the Preamble of the Constitution.” (1959, 669).

Of course, this right to information is also not absolute. Farrand’s debates make it evident that the Framers recognized the need for the suppression of information regarding matters such

as military activities. For example, according to Madison’s account of the Constitutional Convention, on August 11, 1787, Elbridge Gerry and Roger Sherman proposed a clause in the requirement that the houses of the Legislature publish their proceedings which would exempt matters related to “treaties and military operations.” (Farrand 1911, vol. 2, 256). Hamilton also made clear that he believed “secrecy” is vital to the executive branch when he argued in *The Federalist* #70 that a plural executive would reduce the executive branch’s capacity for it (Hamilton, Madison and Jay 1987, 403). The Founders ultimately settled on the clause in the Constitution that “each House shall keep a Journal of its Proceedings, and from time to time publish the same, excepting such Parts as may in their Judgment require Secrecy” – clearly recognizing the legitimacy of suppression when it was required (art. 1, sec. 5).

Obviously, national security concerns will at times preclude government disclosure; otherwise, the very existence of the nation would be put at stake. It may also be necessary for the government to withhold more information during emergencies – however the Constitution says little about this issue. It will also arguably be legitimate for the Treasury public affairs officials who are the subjects of this study to withhold information that would roil global markets. Likewise, it may be counterproductive for government officials, like the Framers, to share the minutiae of deliberations and negotiations before they have been finalized and are ready for public deliberation.

Furthermore, some have noted that the Constitutional Convention was itself conducted in secret. However, it was of course the initial stages of the Convention’s deliberations that were conducted in secrecy (indeed, it would be impossible to enforce a requirement that political negotiations be made public). Upon agreeing on a proposal, what did the Framers do? They immediately made it available to the people for public review and deliberation.

To be sure, no constitutional mechanism guarantees that citizens will actually avail themselves of the opportunity to observe their government so that they make informed judgments at the ballot box. Anthony Downs argued that it is rational for the ordinary citizen to be ignorant of many of the activities of his or her government. Obtaining information “requires time and is therefore costly,” and so it is rational for a citizen to only seek such information if it will yield a return that exceeds the cost of obtaining the information (1957, 146). Morris P. Fiorina and Matthew S. Levendusky have described a modern political class disconnected from the majority of the American people (2006, 49). Ilya Somin has argued that “political ignorance [in the United States] is extensive and poses a very serious challenge to democratic theory.” (2013, 3). Furthermore, citizens often do not make informed decisions on issues; John Zaller has shown that when asked their opinion in a poll, many Americans simply respond with whatever argument they have heard recently, and those that do have more well-formed opinions resist information which does not comport with those beliefs (1992, 76, 44).

However, the debate regarding whether a democracy requires that citizens inform themselves falls outside of the scope of this study. My research simply argues that the Framers were clear that the American people should have an opportunity to judge their leaders, and therefore the people should generally be able to access information about what is happening inside their government, should they choose to do so. Even if only a tiny percentage of Americans actually avail themselves of the right to examine most government information, this small group can, in the famous formulation of Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, pull “fire alarms” if they notice wrongdoing or disagree with the government’s actions, to raise broader awareness of the problem (1984). Therefore, even if only a small number of Americans read any single document the government releases, the system can still work, because they can

publicize troubling results.

Of course, the fact that not all citizens will lucidly evaluate the information that the government releases does not absolve the government from the responsibility to disclose information. Regardless of the challenges that an uneducated or apathetic citizenry poses to democracy theory, a government that operated under a veil of secrecy by claiming that citizens could not understand what their leaders were doing would be dangerous, undemocratic, and unconstitutional indeed.

Thus, it is clear that the intention of the Framers was for sovereignty to ultimately rest in the people and for citizens to assess their representatives based upon their performance. Access to information about what representatives are doing is a prerequisite for such accountability and assessment, and thus clearly a part of their intention; as Madison noted, other rights would be jeopardized without it. Accordingly, as Grossman and Kumar have noted, every president promises to run an open government. (1981, 273).

However, American citizens face a knowledge problem: it is difficult to know whether government officials withhold or distort information requested by the media, and if so, whether their reasons for doing so are legitimate. To ascertain this, we must study the actions of the public affairs officers, who control the people's access to this information. Unfortunately, government public affairs officials are the subject of little scholarly research. Stephen Hess' (1984) anecdotal study – which reported on the results of his year spent observing public affairs officers in government agencies and the White House – is now three decades old. The growth of the “permanent campaign” since that time makes it particularly critical to bring our knowledge up to date.

## **The Permanent Campaign**

In contradistinction to the goals of the founders, critics have charged modern White House staff with conducting a “permanent campaign.” Under the permanent campaign, presidential aides are said to focus on courting public opinion rather than good governance (Hecllo 2000). Furthermore, former White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan has reported that, in conducting the “permanent campaign,” government officials distort the truth and withhold information from the American people (2008, 4). Theodore Lowi has warned that this pathology of the presidency has become so serious that it threatens the future of our nation itself (1984, 20).

However, scholars have not yet measured how deeply the campaign penetrates. Is it conducted exclusively from the White House? Or are government agencies also involved? If agency resources are being utilized in the service of this campaign, its potential scope and scale is dramatically expanded. This study begins to answer this question, by querying agency public affairs officers about their practices.

## **Theories to be Tested**

To preview my arguments, I posit that modern presidents have been misguided in hiring more political appointees in an attempt to strengthen their control over the executive branch. I argue that, in fact, career civil servants serve the president more effectively than appointees and are no more likely to engage in acts of disloyalty to an administration. I further argue that government public affairs officers are not conducting a “permanent campaign” because the immense workloads of political appointees leave them lacking the time to engage in such proactive tactics – resulting in a previously unstudied and extraordinary, if tenuous, mechanism of democratic protection.

My theory questions the political science literature on the administrative presidency, which suggests that political appointments are a potent and effective tool of executive control (Nathan 1983; Moe 1999). It also fills a void in the communication literature by beginning to identify, for the first time, the boundaries of the “permanent campaign” which scholars and critics have accused modern White House aides of conducting (Heclo 2000; Blumenthal 1982; McClellan 2008). Finally, it begins to provide a clearer picture of the activities of government public affairs officers, who serve as critical gatekeepers to the information that the American people receive about the activities of their government and state of the economy, but have been almost entirely neglected in a White House-focused literature.

I will begin by reviewing the extant literature on appointees and civil servants (chapter 1) as well as public affairs officers in government agencies and the permanent campaign (chapter 2). I will then outline my research design (chapter 3) and discuss the results of my research on the relative efficacy of appointees vs. civil servants (chapter 4), the relative loyalty of appointees vs. civil servants (chapter 5), and whether a permanent campaign is being conducted in the Treasury Department (chapter 6). Finally, chapter 7 will discuss my conclusions and the implications of my findings.

## **Chapter 1: Literature Review: Political Appointees vs. the Bureaucracy**

This chapter reviews the extant literature on political appointees and civil servants. Although the conventional wisdom is that civil servants will be less loyal to the president than political appointees, and perhaps incompetent as well, I argue that there is reason to believe that this view is mistaken – a proposition which I will go on to test.

Modern presidents of both political parties have made no secret of their displeasure with bureaucrats. As James Q. Wilson has noted, “no politician ever lost votes by denouncing the bureaucracy.” (1989, 235).

President Franklin D. Roosevelt exclaimed that “the Treasury is so large and far-flung and ingrained in its practices that I find it almost impossible to get the action and results I want, even with Henry [Morgenthau] there. But the Treasury is not to be compared with the State Department. You should go through the experience of trying to get any changes in the thinking, policy, and actions of the career diplomats and then you’d know what a real problem is. But the Treasury and the State Department put together are nothing as compared with the Na-a-vy.” (Maranto 1993, 28).

President Nixon wrote in his memoir that he believed the liberal beliefs of civil servants made them unsympathetic to his agenda (Aberbach and Rockman 2000, 96). He also argued: “we can’t depend on people who believe in another philosophy of government to give us their undivided loyalty or their best work ... If we don’t get rid of those people, they will either sabotage us from within, or they’ll just sit back on their well-paid asses and wait for the next election to bring back their old bosses.” (Maranto 2005, 101).

President Carter reported: “Before I became president, I realized and I was warned that dealing with the federal bureaucracy would be one of the worst problems I would have to face. It



has been even worse than I had anticipated.” (Edwards 1983, 204).

President Reagan identified the government as the *source* of the country’s problems, indicating the need to “get the bureaucracy by the neck and shake it loose and say, stop doing what you’re doing.” (Golden 2000, 5)

Their senior advisers have been no less dramatic in their denunciations. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote that, during the Kennedy years, “the problem of moving forward seemed in great part the problem of making the permanent government responsive to the policies of the presidential government.” (Cronin 1980, 231). Before becoming Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger noted: “First of all, you have to weaken the bureaucracy! ... They all want to do what I’m doing! So the problem becomes: how do you get them to push paper around, spin their wheels, so that you can get your work done.” (ibid.).

While President George H.W. Bush ushered in a softer tone of rhetoric on the civil service, the suspicion of modern presidents towards the bureaucracy remains evident in the decisions of modern presidents to maintain the record numbers of political appointees reached in the 1980s (Lewis 2012, 587).

Many scholars concur with these officials. According to George C. Edwards III, “one of the safest predictions about a new presidential administration is that the president will often find the federal bureaucracy unresponsive to his desires.” (1983, 203). Thomas Cronin noted that “it is difficult to overestimate the degree of frustration and resentment that White House aides develop about the seeming indifference of the permanent government toward presidential policy.” (1980, 224).

### **A Typology of Why Civil Servants Are Bad**

While a scholarly chorus concurs with politicians that civil servants will not serve the

president's interests, they offer a wide range of reasons for why this will be the case. Scholars have contended that:

***1. Managers cannot effectively control civil servants.***

In contrast to the private sector, federal civil service rules make it hard for public sector managers to fire staff (Wilson 1989, 120-121). John Brehm and Scott Gates argued that “even if these rules do not explicitly ban certain sanctions or rewards, the time and energy required to fill out all the forms to justify the special treatment of an employee effectively rules out such activities, especially when supervisory resources are otherwise constrained.” (1997, 42-43). Robert Maranto has actually called for abolishing the tenure system in the civil service, arguing that managers can only fire staff with “extreme difficulty.” (1998, 630). “The games that federal managers must play to get work done under current personnel rules sap morale by ... forcing federal employees to work beside a small number of nonperformers who cannot be separated.” (ibid., 631).

Another legendary tool that civil servants are said to have in eliding the control of their bosses is their informational advantages. In contrast with appointees, who tend to serve for short periods, civil servants typically acquire their informational advantages through many years of work in their agencies. As far back as the *Theaetetus*, Plato distinguished between the expert and the layman (1987). According to Max Weber, “under normal conditions, the power position of a fully developed bureaucracy is always overtowering. The ‘political master’ finds himself in the position of the ‘dilettante’ who stands opposite the ‘expert,’ facing the trained official who stands within the management of administration.” (Gerth and Mills 1958, 232). Weber made clear that civil servants wield these power positions to their own advantage: “Every bureaucracy seeks to increase the superiority of the professionally informed by keeping their knowledge and

intentions secret. Bureaucratic administration always tends to be an administration of ‘secret sessions’: in so far as it can, it hides its knowledge and action.” (ibid., 233). Michael Sanera has further argued that this is an especially pronounced problem in the federal government, because “when the political executive issues instructions to his staff, he is not aided in checking on the results of his subordinate’s actions by a profit statement. Knowing this, subordinates realize that they automatically have more discretion.” (1984, 532).

Since they are not incentivized by variable monetary rewards to pursue the interests of their bosses and are able to elude the detection of behavior that would displease their bosses, civil servants will, by this line of argument, be free to pursue their own agendas. In his important work, *Inside Bureaucracy*, Anthony Downs argued that civil servants will be significantly, though not entirely, motivated by their own personal interests (1967, 87). Whenever they have a measure of discretion, they will use some of it to advance their own goals (ibid., 64). According to Downs, their complex array of personal goals will include power, income, prestige, convenience, security, personal loyalty, pride in their work, desire to serve the public interest, and commitment to a specific program (ibid., 84).

Others argue that civil servants will seek to maximize their leisure time at work. In their study of the firm, for example, Armen Alchian and Harold Demsetz highlighted the difficulty of detecting shirking when employees work in teams; since monitoring behavior has costs, employers will stop monitoring at the point at which the cost of monitoring begins to exceed the gains they receive from doing so, which will allow employees to indulge in leisure time on the job (1972, 779-780). While it is possible that an appointee would seek to maximize his or her leisure time as well, attempts to evoke detection would likely be much more difficult, since they typically serve in much higher profile positions.

## ***2. The organizational cultures of civil servants are perverse and/or preclude accountability.***

According to scholars, the perverse organizational cultures of bureaucracies will further inhibit responsiveness to the executive. In his classic analysis, Weber identified impersonality, hierarchy, and rule governance as essential qualities of bureaucracies, indicating that the “characteristic principle of bureaucracy [is] the abstract regularity of the execution of authority.” (Gerth and Mills 1958, 224). Robert K. Merton likewise argued that “goal displacement” causes civil servants to focus more on following rules than on achieving goals, even when the conditions which initially made the application of a particular rule appropriate no longer apply (1957, 198-199). Similarly, Downs and others have argued that bureaucracies will be characterized by inertia, resisting change when possible (1967, 174).

In *The Bureaucratic Experience*, Ralph Hummel posited a norm of “bureaucratic detachment” which causes civil servants to treat their clients as cases instead of humans (1977, 10). “To the Social Security official, a man’s death is just another form filled out; to his wife that death is the death of her beloved or hated husband and all he meant and all the things they ever did together.” (ibid., 9). For Hummel, bureaucrats who behave in this way are “a new personality type, headless and soulless.” (ibid., 3). They lack some of the features of normal human beings as described by Freud, with the ego which would normally control a person yielding to the rules of their jobs, and the superego which acts based upon social norms yielding as the bureaucrat carries out orders, even when they do not seem to be the right thing to do (ibid., 7, 14). A “psychology of dependence” instead takes root in bureaucrats, as they become dependent upon others to direct their actions (ibid., 80). “Both their emotions and actions, to say nothing of their wills, are bound by the structure to which they have surrendered their souls for the sake of a salary and institutional identity.” (ibid., 39). They become so inured to not showing affect that

they become incapable of intimacy in their personal lives. “In the end,” according to Hummel, “bureaucracy destroys the family.” (ibid., 51). It also stunts the growth of the individual, which Freud indicated to be necessary for social progress (ibid., 112). The effect is a government focused on process instead of people (ibid., 28).

Merton, who shared this assessment of bureaucratic impersonality, voiced little hope that the problem could be rectified. “This source of conflict *may* be minimized in private enterprise since the client can register an effective protest by transferring his trade to another organization within the competitive system. But with the monopolistic nature of the public organization, no such alternative is possible.” (1957, 203).

Another factor posited to reduce bureaucratic responsiveness to the executive is professionalization. The time has long passed when President Jackson could claim that the ordinary citizen was fit for most government posts. (Rourke 1984, 17). In *Democracy and the Public Service*, Frederick Mosher noted that the government has become increasingly staffed by professionals with specialized training, such as scientists or economists. “The choice of these professionals, the determination of their skills, and the content of their work are now principally determined, not by general governmental agencies, but by their own professional elites, professional organizations, and the institutions and faculties of higher education.” (1982, 142). Lawrence Lynn likewise argued that “agencies in which ... career personnel have strong professional identities ... probably constitute the most difficult challenges to a political appointee.” (1985, 362).

Finally, civil servants may promote the organizational interests of the bureaucracies with which they come to identify. Merton argued that “the *esprit de corps* and informal social organization which typically develops in such situations often leads the personnel to defend their

entrenched interests rather than to assist their clientele and elected higher officials.” Furthermore, he said, “bureaucratic officials affectively identify themselves with their way of life. They have a pride of craft which leads them to resist change in established routines.” (1957, 201). By contrast, appointees are typically experienced in working in political environments, which require regular adaptation to changing conditions.

***3. Civil servants will be driven by their own personal ideologies and program loyalties instead of the directives of appointees.***

Downs’ typology of the five types of bureaucrats includes the “zealot,” who narrowly pushes his or her own pet policies and priorities (1967, 88). Scholars worry that civil servants will attempt to sabotage or shirk administration efforts with which they personally disagree. Sanera, for example, argued that “the simple expectation that the private political beliefs of bureaucrats will not interfere with the political executive’s control of the government is naïve.” (1984, 517). Clinton Rossiter reported that “public servants are no less anxious than [the President] to get on with the business of good and democratic government. But his idea and their idea of what is ‘good’ or ‘democratic’ must often be at stiff odds with one another, especially when he is pushing some untried and unconventional policy.” (1987, 46). By contrast, appointees are ostensibly appointed by the presidents for whom they serve at least in part on the basis of their ideological agreement.

Downs noted that civil servants may also resist the administration they serve, if they do not believe particular directives to be in the best interests of the programs to which they are loyal (1967, 84). Weber, Chester Barnard, and numerous other scholars have also warned that bureaucrats may be driven by the goal of organizational maintenance, in part due to self-interest,

since they depend upon their organizations for their livelihoods (Gerth and Mills 1958, 220; Barnard 1968, 230; Niskanen 1971).

#### ***4. Civil servants will serve masters other than the president.***

Scholars argue that the roles of Congress in determining agency mandates and funds and of outside interest groups in providing support for agencies may cause civil servants to be more loyal to these masters than to the president. (Hecklo 1977, 226; Moe 1999, 148; Sanera 1984, 491). The traditional view of “agency capture” posited the idea of “iron triangles,” in which congressional committees, interest groups, and bureaucrats aligned to protect each others’ interests, with the President visibly excluded. While this theory was disproven by the deregulation that occurred in the 1970s, some scholars continue to argue that bureaucracies will be beholden to these outside actors, whose support for their organizations is often longer-lasting than that of the less-permanent executive (Wood and Waterman 1994, 17-20). Terry Moe, for example, argued that “a pervasive problem is that all organizations have their ... own bases of support, and the president cannot expect to control them easily. This is clearly true for the usual government agencies, whose interests and worldviews center around their own programs, and whose support (which they orchestrate) comes from congressional committees and interest groups with political muscle.” (1999, 148). Bureaucratic leadership may also have a vested interest in maintaining their own power positions which could cause them to defy presidential directives (Michels 1978). Conversely, as previously noted, appointees are ostensibly appointed by presidents at least in part on the basis of their loyalty and/or ideological agreement.

As a result of these four factors, scholars argue that civil servants may shirk their assignments or sabotage administration efforts, instead of faithfully executing administration

orders. Brehm and Gates posited two different types of possible shirking: leisure shirking or “dissent-shirking,” the latter of which is due to opposition to a particular policy (1997, 30). At worst, bureaucrats will actively attempt to sabotage administration efforts. In the past, French weavers would stick *sabots* (clogs) in their looms during industrial disputes, to sabotage the outputs of their employers. Brehm and Gates report that the devices of modern-day bureaucratic saboteurs are delay, hindrance, bungling, and obstruction (ibid., 28).

For a number of presidents and scholars alike, politicization has been seen as the solution to weakening the likelihood and impact of such behavior. In the “most extreme” view, Sanera has called for the appointment of political staff who serve as “jigsaw puzzle” managers by shielding the entirety of their controversial aims from civil servants in order to guard against sabotage (Pfiffner 1987a, 59). Under such a scheme, bureaucrats see only enough of the pieces to do their individual jobs. (Sanera 1984, 514-515).

### **The Competence of Government Managers**

Yet this literature is seemingly contradicted by a variety of evidence indicating that civil servants perform well on the job – better, in fact, than political appointees.

In a survey conducted by the Presidential Appointee Initiative in 1999-2000 of hundreds of appointees who served in the Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton administrations, just eleven percent reported that their fellow appointees were the “best and brightest America has to offer.” (Light and Thomas 2000, 8). By contrast, when asked to assess the competence of the civil servants with whom they worked on a scale of one to five, with five being “high competence,” eighty-three percent of the appointees gave the careerists a score of four or five (ibid., 32).

In an earlier survey of political appointees by the National Academy of Public



Administration in 1985, eighty-four percent rated the competence of civil servants as high or very high, and eighty-three percent reported the responsiveness of civil servants to be high or very high. The Academy reported it “striking” that “presidential appointees stand second to none in their admiration of career executives.” (1985, 29). Similarly, Judith Michaels – who conducted a survey of 639 Senate-confirmed appointees during the administration of President George H.W. Bush, as well as follow-up interviews – found that Senate-confirmed appointees consulted members of the career Senior Executive Service (SES) more than they consulted other Senate-confirmed appointees or non-career members of the SES; the appointees also “found careerists generally more helpful than the other two groups in accomplishing their work tasks.” (1995, 279).

By contrast, scholars have been warning for generations that wherever political appointees go, government performance tends to deteriorate. In his seminal work, *A Government of Strangers*, Hugh Heclo described government as “a system that depends on political amateurs for leadership in an operating environment that is distinctly inimical to amateurism.” (1977, 155). He reported that appointees lack the substantive expertise of their careerist counterparts, who typically learn on the job and stay in government for decades. Heclo found that appointees stay in their jobs for such a short time that they depart about the time they have finally figured out how to do their work (ibid., 110). He further reported that appointees persistently reported an absence of teamwork in government. Their previous lack of acquaintance with one another and their rapid turnover meant that they never quite figured out how to work together as a group across departments and agencies (ibid., 104). Indeed, their short stints have earned appointees the moniker in some quarters of the “Christmas help.” (Maranto 2005, 2).

But as far back as 1939, at the dawn of our New Deal-spawned system of larger

government, a study of federal administrators by Arthur Macmahon and John Millett warned that “tenure [of appointees] has been short, and even when the appointees have happened to possess cognate knowledge, they have been unacquainted with all the complicated and distinctive settings in which governmental action is conducted.” (1939, 123). The possession of such “cognate knowledge” was, however, unusual: They found that Assistant Secretaries were appointed “with little regard for qualifications or the needs of the posts.” (ibid., 302). “Unacquainted with procedures and limitations, unfamiliar with the background of each activity, they have often begun with the belief that all needs changing. Impatience of this sort may produce chaos.” (ibid., 128). Furthermore, they found that the “haphazard” system of appointment resulted in a government without coherence (ibid., 290). Some of the appointees chosen to serve particular cabinet heads found themselves “at odds” with their bosses (ibid., 123).

Fast forward seven decades. Researchers are still saying the same thing. A 2008 study by David E. Lewis analyzed how the government rates the performance of its own programs, under the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART). Using this tool, the federal government rates the effectiveness of its own programs by assigning a score of 0-100 to each program in four areas: program purpose and design; strategic planning; program management; and program results (174). Lewis found that programs run by appointees are rated significantly lower than those run by careerists. The average PART score for programs run by members of the career SES was 69.58 out of 100. Average PART scores dropped to 63.50 for Senate-confirmed appointees and to 58.66 for SES appointees. Lewis also found that the higher the number of appointees in an agency, the lower its program scores (ibid., 178). Of course, this fails to account for the possibility that appointees might be used by presidents to sabotage programs with which the

president disagrees. Nevertheless, the aggregate evidence questioning appointee competence is striking.

Researchers argue that a big part of the problem is that appointees are often hired off of political campaigns, yet the skills needed to be successful on a campaign may be quite different from those needed for governing (Edwards 2001, 83; Rudalevidge 2002, 35; Pfiffner 1996,18). Campaigns focus on simplifying issues for voters – which may be necessary to sell or defeat an idea – while in the White House presidents must build coalitions and offer complex solutions to policy problems that often defy such simplicity (Pfiffner 1996, 18). Campaign staff also tend to lack both policy and management experience. This was certainly the case for many of the Treasury appointees who I interviewed.

In particular, appointees often do not have experience in the policy areas for which they are responsible. Declaring that we have an “amateur government,” David Cohen argued that “no one would ever have brain surgery performed by a science policy expert without a medical degree who had never set foot inside an operating room ... And surely no multimillion dollar corporation would ever place at the head of a major operating division a young man a few years out of college who had never managed funds or supervised more than a handful of people – even if he were the son of the CEO’s boyhood friend. Yet the management qualifications of most political appointees in our federal government – and even the technical qualifications of many – are no more relevant to their positions than those of these ... hypothetical candidates.” (1996, 1). While unlike brain surgeons, political staff have civil servants to help them, it nevertheless seems peculiar that those with less experience would assume the most important positions in organizations which often have a dramatic impact on the lives and livelihoods of American citizens.

Cohen also argued that proper management and supervisory skills are necessary to government leadership, and can only be gained by years of experience in planning, managing resources, negotiating, building coalitions, and fostering healthy workplace environments (ibid., 16-18). Yet “we entrust the administration of the largest ‘company’ in the country, with the biggest budget and staff, the widest range of products and services, and the greatest impact on the life of every American, to a cast of well-meaning political loyalists with little or no management experience. They may be smart, committed, and frequently high-energy workaholics, but most have never *run* anything, except, perhaps, a political campaign.” (ibid., 1).

Unsurprisingly, then, numerous studies affirm that political oversight diminishes agency competence. In a review of 170 case studies of 104 federal agencies, Patrick Wolf reported his most important finding to be that a key contributor to agency performance is autonomy from political control by the president and other political actors (1997, 337).

Paul Light has also argued that it is the quality of political oversight that is important; he found that the better prepared that appointees were for their jobs, the more likely they were to report viewing civil servants as responsive and competent, suggesting that they understood how to manage their subordinates effectively (1987, 170-171). Light reported that appointees generally do come to realize that their civil servants are responsive and competent, but often by then it is too late (ibid., 157). Even when they come to this realization, they tend erroneously to conclude that their own civil servants are anomalous – not that bureaucrats as a group possess these qualities (ibid., 160). Pfiffner has argued that a “cycle of accommodation” occurs, in which appointees initially distrust careerists but eventually come to appreciate their value (60, 1987a).

Other scholars find that the overuse of appointees also reduces the *overall* competence of government. Light has argued that increasing numbers of political appointees over the past

several decades has led to the “thickening” of government. Presidents are increasingly removed from the front lines of policy development and implementation, so they do not benefit from the advice of careerists; information is often distorted as it is transmitted through so many people, and this makes it harder for innovative ideas to make their way to the top (1995, 8, 70; see also National Commission on the Public Service 1989, 26; Dunn 1997, 25). The report that never made it to the Oval Office on the war game played by civil servants in 1965 predicting that a conflict in Vietnam would end in stalemate comes to mind here (Rourke 1991, 127). Light found that the explosion of appointees has also diffused accountability. With so many people now involved in every decision, no one person can be held accountable for anything (1995, 166).

Cohen reported that the large influx and turnover of appointees causes civil servants to spend much of their time training their bosses instead of managing their programs, further reducing overall government competence (1996, 40). The short tenure of appointees also leads appointees to neglect strategies to build the long-term strength of the government organizations they lead. Cohen argued that “political appointees have no real stake in the future of the organizations they manage. They do not see themselves as the caretakers of ongoing public institutions, as responsible for leaving those institutions stronger than when they arrived.” (ibid., 46).

Meanwhile, numerous scholars have argued that as top jobs go to appointees, the civil service becomes less attractive to bureaucrats, because the more prestigious opportunities become foreclosed to them. This results in recruiting problems and diminished incentives for bureaucrats to upgrade their skill sets in preparation for top posts – further reducing aggregate government competence (Lewis 2008, 58; National Commission on the Public Service 1989, 25; Light 2007, 409; Suleiman 2003, 204). By the same token, Hecló argued that the government has

become “a passing parade of people with mythical mandates.” He argued that by reducing the number of appointees, presidents could exert greater control over the executive branch because the remaining appointees would hold positions of true power (1988, 54).

Finally, numerous studies have found that the increased overall number of appointees is at least partly responsible for the increased amount of time it now takes for appointees to be recruited and confirmed, resulting in prolonged vacancies in important posts that further erode government competence (National Commission on the Public Service 1989, 26; Twentieth Century Task Force on the Presidential Appointment Process 1996, 8; Light 2007, 409; Mackenzie 2002, 28; Presidential Appointee Project 1985, 5). Scholars also argue that the sheer volume of appointments presidential staff are required to make seriously inhibits their ability to recruit the very best talent (Pfiffner 1987b, 141; National Academy of Public Administration 1985, 4; Panel on Presidentially Appointed Scientists and Engineers 1992, 12; Ingraham, Thompson and Eisenberg 1995, 270).

### **A Loyalty-Competence Trade-Off?**

Of course, none of these scholars have proposed a government staffed exclusively by bureaucrats. While civil servants are generally seen to bring the neutral policy expertise, institutional memory, and continuity that government requires, appointees bring outside perspectives and perhaps more innovative thinking that is also needed (Lewis 2008, 212, 219). Furthermore, appointees are generally viewed to be legitimate because they represent the president, who has received a mandate from the people in the most recent election. As Delmer Dunn noted, “accountability in a democracy requires that non-elected officials give an account of their actions and activities to elected officials.” (1997, 166).

The real question, then, is how to strike the right balance in numbers. Given the evidence

of the relative competence of the two groups, numerous scholars have called for a reduction in appointees in order to improve government performance (Cohen 1996, 52; Lewis 2012, 592-593; Meier 1997, 197; National Academy of Public Administration 1985, 2; National Commission on the Public Service 1989, 18; Panel on Presidentially Appointed Scientists and Engineers 1992, 18; Twentieth Century Task Force on the Presidential Appointment Process 1996, 8; United States Commission on National Security/21st Century 2001, xv). In doing so, the United States Commission on National Security/21st Century characterized the current appointments system as “putting in jeopardy the leadership and professionalism necessary” for our country’s national security (2001, xv). Paul Volcker, Chairman of the National Commission on the Public Service, characterized the call to reduce appointees as the Commission’s most important recommendation (1996, 31).

However, even if civil servants are more competent, a president might still prefer political appointees if appointees indeed prove to be more loyal. This has led George C. Edwards III to question whether presidents face a “loyalty-competence trade-off” in staffing the executive branch (2001, 81). Lewis has likewise argued that presidents will trade competence in order to achieve agency responsiveness (2008, 202). Christopher Hood and Martin Lodge have described a similar dilemma facing political leaders from time immemorial. From dynastic monarchs such as Frederick the Great of Prussia, to Britain’s Queen Victoria, to twentieth century communist regimes, to J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, Hood and Lodge trace a familiar tension between leaders’ desire for competency and loyalty in their staff (2007).

Downs argued that loyalty is critical to managers in a bureaucracy because they cannot avoid actions which they wish to shield from the public. This will be the case because managers cannot be aware of all actions their subordinates undertake; managers will sometimes make

mistakes; and managers will sometimes take shortcuts in order to achieve rapid results (1967, 71-72). As a result, leaders will sometimes utilize second-rate subordinates, in order to obtain requisite loyalty (ibid., 74).

According to Barnard, presidents are right to prize loyalty in selecting their subordinates. He argued that “the most important single contribution required of the executive, certainly the most universal qualification, is loyalty, domination by the organization personality. This is the first necessity because the lines of communication cannot function at all unless the personal contributions of executives will be present at the required positions, at the times necessary, without default for ordinary personal reasons.” (1968, 220).

Thus, despite the evidence regarding the relatively lower competence of appointees, the strategy of politicization pursued by modern presidents might still make sense – but only if 1) civil servants are found not to be reliably loyal to the president and 2) the greater loyalty of appointees is determined to redound to the president’s benefit. There is reason to doubt that either is the case.

### **The Loyalty of Civil Servants**

Heclo has argued that civil servants effectively have a veto over policy. If they are intent upon thwarting an administration’s efforts, they can leak information to allies in the press, Congress, and interest groups, or wrap politicians in red tape. More simply, they can just not volunteer valuable information that will be critical to the success of an initiative (1977, 172-174). Yet many scholars concur that civil servants generally – though not always – neither shirk their work nor sabotage administration efforts (Aberbach and Rockman 2000, 129; Brehm and Gates 1997, 107; Ferrara and Ross 2005, 46; Golden 2000, 126).

In fact, in the Presidential Appointee Initiative’s 1999-2000 survey, more political



appointees said it was “very difficult” to successfully work with the White House than said it was “very difficult” to direct civil servants! Just five percent of the appointees found managing careerists to be “very difficult” – the same percentage who found the substantive details of their programs to be very difficult. The “very difficult” scores of every other responsibility they were asked about – including managing large programs, working with Congress, working with networks who affect their agency, the federal budget process, and agency decision-making procedures – were significantly higher. When asked to rank the responsiveness of the civil servants they worked with on a scale of one to five, with five being “very responsive,” eighty-one percent of these appointees gave careerists scores of four or five (Light and Thomas 2000, 31).

In another study of bureaucrats which reviewed three large surveys of civil servants conducted in 1979, 1983, and 1992 and case studies of social workers and police officers, Brehm and Gates found no evidence of mass shirking. Rather, they reported “high levels of productivity and superior performance.” (1997, 74). In a 1993 survey of officials in fifteen agencies, Maranto found that “by an ... 81-8% margin the appointees trust the career executives in their organizations.” (78). And, even during the height of the anti-government protests of the late 1960’s, Cary Hershey reported that “no more than 2 percent of the approximately three hundred and thirty thousand Washington-based federal workers have ever participated in any of the numerous forms of protest.” (1973, xi).

Of course, some appointees have claimed otherwise. For example, President Nixon’s chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, claimed that bureaucratic shirking or sabotage “happened every day.” Yet when pressed in an interview with James Pfiffner for examples of such activity, he could come up with exactly one: the IRS had refused to audit the tax returns of rival politicians

(Pfiffner 1996, 74).

What accounts for all of this evidence of the loyalty of civil servants? Scholars have found that it is largely the inverse of the expectations in the typology of civil servants examined earlier.

***1. Managers have carrots and sticks to control civil servants, though they are often unnecessary.***

In his seminal work *Bureaucracy*, Wilson considered why bureaucrats work at all rather than shirk at every opportunity.” He argued that “in part the answer is that even in government service managers to some extent can control the material rewards of their subordinates. It may be hard to fire or demote anybody, but it is not too hard to give people attractive or miserable job assignments or to speed up or slow down their prospects for promotion.” (1989, 156). A variety of scholars concur that an array of incentives are effective in inducing civil servants to adhere to the policies and practices set by their managers. As Pfiffner argued, “career bureaucrats want to keep their jobs and their paychecks. They realize that if they are found to be undermining administration policies in any important way, they can be fired, demoted, moved geographically, or given a job with no function.” (1996, 84).

Even Sanera conceded that “while it is part of popular opinion that federal employees cannot be rewarded or punished, they can.” (1984, 526). He outlined a range of tools appointees have for managing civil servants, including trading access to high-level staff and high-profile projects for loyalty; the merit pay provisions for top-level civil servants in the SES; and the prerogative to move staff to less-desirable positions and locations (1984, 525-529). Maranto concurred that because “Washington is a competitive, status oriented company town” and just 7,000 of the 1.8 million civil servants will be promoted to the upper-echelon SES, the power of

promotion that appointees wield is an efficacious tool (2005, 4). Edward Lazear has further noted that a system such as that of the civil service, in which a worker's wages grow over time, serves to incentivize the productivity of the worker, who is motivated to secure future benefits (1981, 606). Meanwhile, the threat of exiling civil servants to "turkey farms," where low performers are sent, is likewise a potent weapon in the arsenal of appointees; "Research suggests that a single such bonus, promotion, or exile to a turkey farm can send a message throughout an entire organization." (Maranto 2005, 105).

Marissa Martino Golden's study of four agencies that President Reagan attempted to alter dramatically also confirmed this finding. She found that self-interest compelled obedience on the part of civil servants because they sought to avoid the wrath of appointees and feared losing their jobs or being transferred to undesirable positions or geographical locations (2000, 159). As a result, the motive of self-interest resulted in *increased* bureaucratic compliance during the Reagan administration, despite the fact that many civil servants disagreed personally with the policies their agencies pursued (ibid., 23).

Stephen Hess' study of government public affairs officers during the Reagan administration echoed this finding: "Press officers perform a services function, and as staff officers they wish to develop special relationships with the supervisors on whom they must depend for advancement." (1984, 12). He reported that "most of the conflicts I witnessed were between political appointees, usually within an agency" and "most fights turn out to be not us against them but us against us, including some internecine quarrels among career personnel." (ibid., 12-13).

Similarly, Joseph A. Ferrara and Lynn C. Ross interviewed political appointees and civil servants in 2004 and found that the careerists wanted their political bosses to succeed. The

researchers concluded that this was the case in part because “an unsuccessful appointee is probably an unhappy appointee, and an unhappy appointee is probably an unpleasant manager, which erodes the quality of work life. Ultimately careerists, like most people, want to please their bosses.” (2005, 50).

These studies, then, confirm that superiors *can* exercise control over their subordinates. Yet they leave open the possibility that bosses will be unable to do so if they cannot detect insubordination in the first place, as Weber and Downs have warned. However, Francis Rourke has argued that legislators often specialize in policy areas and politicians may do so as well, offsetting the informational advantage Weber posited bureaucrats to possess (1984, 169). Both congressional committees and interest groups affected by agency decisions closely monitor agency behavior, and can pull “fire alarms” by notifying the president if they are unhappy, providing the president with an additional check on bureaucratic expertise (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; Calvert, McCubbins and Weingast 1989, 599).

Furthermore, a variety of other evidence suggests that the goals and preferences of bureaucrats often align with those of their bosses in the first place. For example, Rourke has argued that “a private vice can, as Adam Smith long ago noted, often be transformed into a public virtue. The community may also be as well served if rank-and-file employees are allowed to gratify their continuing desire for improvements in remuneration and working conditions. It is certainly reasonable to expect that satisfied employees will be more efficient...” (1984, 102).

In keeping with this theory, in their study, Brehm and Gates found no evidence to support the leisure-maximization hypothesis of Alchian and Demsetz – nor other claims of bureaucratic shirking (1997, 198). In fact, in a 1992 survey, when federal workers were asked whether they desired paid time off, it was the least popular of seven possible types of rewards (*ibid.*, 79).

Similarly, in 1979 and 1983 surveys, more than ninety-two percent of workers agreed with the statement “I work hard on my job.” (ibid., 90). In the 1992 survey, more than eighty percent agreed with the statement “when I don’t feel well in the morning, I still try to come to work because I know my contribution will be missed.”

Brehm and Gates found that while supervisors do impact subordinate compliance, their influence is small (ibid., 107). Staff were motivated primarily by what they termed “functional” benefits, in which “the subordinate acquires utility by performing the very things that he is supposed to do.” (ibid., 75). In the 1979 and 1983 surveys, employees reported the most popular aspect of their job to be “getting a feeling of accomplishment from your job.” The second most popular in 1979 was “the chances you have to accomplish something worthwhile.” After functional benefits, the second most-important driver of their behavior was solidarity benefits: “rewards one receives from the camaraderie and recognition of ones’ peers” – such as respect and friendship (ibid., 74-75, 80).

The research of James L. Perry and Lois Recascino Wise concurs on this finding that civil servants often possess innate desires to do their jobs, rather than shirk, making monitoring and/or coercion by superiors unnecessary. They have found that individuals who possess what they term “public service motivation” are more likely to become civil servants (2010, 693). This motivation “is associated conceptually with six dimensions: attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest, civic duty, social justice, self-sacrifice, and compassion.” (ibid., 5). Dennis Wittmer’s survey of civil servants likewise found that they “exhibited a higher value for doing work that is helpful to others” than individuals in the private sector (1991, 379). Individuals so driven would seem unlikely to eschew work in favor of leisure while on the clock.

Vice President Al Gore’s report “From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government that

Works Better and Costs Less” similarly reported that “our interviews with hundreds of federal workers support what survey after survey of public service workers have found: People want challenging jobs.” (1993, 7). Wilson likewise argued that bureaucrats are motivated by a “desire to do the job.” (1989, 156). Pfiffner noted that such a desire should incentivize cooperation on the part of civil servants, because “...they cannot fulfill their professional roles if they are not part of the action.” Therefore, “this professional and psychological need to be included on the part of career executives is not compatible with foot dragging, sabotage of administration policies, or merely adequate performance of duties.” (1996, 84). Maranto likewise found that “given constrained public sector salaries, career executives get important *psychological* income from playing for a winning team.” (2005, 4). Likewise, Barnard noted that “the accomplishment of an organization purpose becomes itself a source of personal satisfaction and a motive for many individuals in many organizations.” (1968, 89). Similarly, Ferrara and Ross found that “careerists care about adding value to the process. If a careerist’s political boss does not accomplish his or her goals, this diminishes the careerist’s perception that he or she is contributing.” (2005, 50).

These studies thus suggest that the civil service system has not completely hamstrung the executive; administrations still have tools at their disposal for punishing and rewarding staff. While superiors will only be able to effectively wield their powers to the extent that they can accurately detect the behavior of their subordinates, much evidence suggests that this problem of incomplete information will not result in leisure-shirking on the part of careerists. This is because careerists are predisposed to work hard in the first place, driven by the sense of accomplishment they derive from their work.

A final indication that civil servants work hard lies in the quality of the results they

produce. In a review of the extant literature, Charles Goodsell noted that “numerous individual citizen surveys, conducted at all levels of government, in just about every functional area conceivable, and over several decades back even to 1929, all yield the same essential result: *Most citizens are satisfied with their personal experiences with bureaucracy most of the time.* The proportionate levels of satisfaction generally range from perhaps two-thirds to 70 or 75 percent, and sometimes much higher.” (1994, 29). In another indication of the quality of the work of the U.S. federal bureaucracy, a comparative study of popular confidence conducted by the European Value Systems Study Group and reported in 1982 found that the reputation of the civil service in the U.S. was better than that of both the U.S. Congress and the civil service in any other country (ibid., 70-72). Furthermore, Goodsell noted that studies do not even generally find that *private-sector* firms are more efficient than the bureaucracy (ibid., 63).

## **2. Organizational culture may promote loyalty to appointees.**

A large body of work focuses on how the culture of an organization comes to influence the behavior of its members. Wilson described organizational culture as “a distinctive way of viewing and reacting to the bureaucratic world – that shapes whatever discretionary authority (and it is often a great deal) the operators may have.” (1989, 27). In his seminal work *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization*, Herbert Simon noted that these ways of viewing the world are initially imposed on a person who joins the organization, but soon become internalized and a part of the person’s psychology and attitudes (1957, 198). This culture influences how the individual comes to make decisions “by limiting the range within which an individual’s decisions and activities are to lie.” (ibid., 199). Through the process of identifying with the organization, “the individual substitutes organizational objectives ... for his own aims as the value-indices which determine his

organizational decisions.” (ibid., 218).

The effects of organizational culture may be powerful. Wilson noted the famous study of the Hawthorne plant of Western Electric Company, which found that workers reduced their output to adhere to group norms, essentially placing higher priority on peer rewards than on monetary rewards (1989, 48). John DiIulio found that civil servants in the Bureau of Prisons prioritized the goals of the organization over their own personal goals (Dunn 1997, 33). A similar dynamic is seen in soldiers at war. “By almost any standard, the rationally self-interested behavior for a soldier facing the prospect of imminent death or injury is to break and run.” (Wilson 1989, 45). Why do they fight? At least in part because of peer expectations and concerns for their reputations – two forces which scholars say make organizational culture a particularly potent influence on behavior (ibid., 46-47).

D.M. Rousseau has argued that “people who share beliefs about the behaviors they are committed to demonstrate are in a sense doubly bound to those behaviors, both by their personal commitments as well as by social pressure to fit in and be accepted.” (1995, 48). But people conform not merely for superficial reasons. Doing so may also have great utility. The desire for cognitive and behavioral consistency is a well-documented human need (Brehm and Gates 1997, 51). Brehm and Gates argue that the reason people conform to specific behaviors is because at some point someone initially derived a better outcome from the behavior, and following standard operating procedures is more rational than undergoing a complicated decision-making process for each occurrence (ibid., 72, 5). As a result, they found that employees learning by imitation could end up working hard for rules which they personally disliked (ibid., 73). Additionally, Downs and Moe have both argued that individuals invest in their reputations with the expectation of future rewards (Downs 1967, 69; Moe 1989, 272).



A variety of additional evidence suggests organizational culture is a powerful influence on the behavior of civil servants. Bernard Mennis, for example, studied foreign service officers and military officers. In keeping with the cultures in which they worked, Mennis found foreign service officers to be more liberal, and military officers to be more conservative (Wilson 1989, 68). Kenneth Meier and Lloyd Nigro found that it was agency membership that determined the attitudes of the civil servants they studied (1976, 465-467). Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman also found that the ideological stances of civil servants were related to the departments in which they worked (2000, 48-49).

All of this has led Wilson to conclude that “people matter, but organization matters also, and tasks matter most of all.” (1989, 173). This means that we must study *particular workplaces* to determine whether compliance is a shared value, behavior and expectation among civil servants.

While, as noted previously, many scholars have argued that organizational culture reduces the responsiveness of civil servants, others argue that it is or may also be an important force promoting bureaucratic compliance to the aims of appointees. Wilson, for example, noted that an organization may be said to have a mission when its organizational culture is broadly shared. When this occurs, managers may be confident that subordinates will do what managers desire because they have common understandings, helping to overcome the problem of shirking (1989, 95, 109). Similarly, Evan Ringquist has argued that “the most effective restraint on bureaucracy is not adversarial power, but the values, mission, and role expectations of agencies and their personnel,” and that these elements of organizational culture can be shaped by appointees through processes such as re-education, bargaining or replacing staff (1995, 352).

In particular, scholars have found that two factors that should influence organizational

cultures – particular shared group norms regarding the role of civil servants and professional training – may promote civil service compliance.

### *Civil Service Norms*

In the bureaucracies envisioned by Weber and Woodrow Wilson, there would be a neat dichotomy between political appointees who determine policy, and civil servants who execute it (Gerth and Mills 1958, 220; Wilson 1886). Today, scholars generally agree that such distinctions are not feasible in practice. Yet a variety of evidence suggests that civil servants continue to see their proper role as neutral executors of the directives of their political bosses, in recognition of their supposed electoral mandates. This is likely due to the fact that, as Rourke has noted, “the political executive, whether elected or appointed, is in some sense a symbol of public control of the governmental process. In a society highly impregnated with democratic ideology – as is true of the United States, for example – this is a formidable source of authority.” (1984, 113).

In Golden’s interviews, she found that civil service norms prevented careerists from sabotaging Reagan’s initiatives, even though they often disagreed with them personally. The bureaucrats explained that the president had a legitimate electoral mandate to effect change, and it was their job as professionals to execute policy as directed. They “believed that loyalty to presidential leadership *was* “the right thing.” (2000, 24). Or, as one bureaucrat told her: “Of course there will be changes around here – there’s been an election and nobody elected me.” (ibid., 22).

The interviews conducted by Ferrara and Ross interviews echoed this finding. “Many careerists spoke of the administration as having the right to make its mark on the government by virtue of its electoral legitimacy. There is a sense among careerists that an important part of

doing their job is serving the agenda of the current president *because* he is the current president and regardless of his party. In general, we found that careerists check their personal politics at the door because they view their role in the political process as technical, not partisan.” (2005, 45).

Additionally, Maranto and Hult conducted surveys of senior civil servants in 1987-1988 and 1993-1994 and reported an “absence of relationships between careerist ideology and evaluations of the political appointees of both presidents Reagan and Clinton” which they noted “arguably point to the general centrism of civil servants and to norms of bureaucratic accommodation.” (2004, 211).

### *Professional Training*

Wilson noted that bureaucratic behavior is often attributable to their professional norms. (1989, 59). “In a bureaucracy, professionals are those employees who receive some significant portion of their incentives from organized groups of fellow practitioners located outside the agency.” (ibid., 60). Such professionals “will bring to the agency their skills but also their biases: Lawyers, economists, and engineers see the world in very different ways.” (ibid., 371). In *Democracy and the Public Service*, Frederick Mosher outlined the reasons why this will be the case: people first self-select into their professional fields; next the selection process weeds out those who are unlikely to conform to professional expectations; the individuals then undergo training, providing another opportunity to remove non-conformists; on the job, the systems of supervision, review and promotion reinforce professional norms; and many people stay on the job for decades. (1982, 162-164). “The holding of a single perspective for so long a time – up to forty years – is almost inevitably a sculptor of viewpoints, values, and methods” (ibid., 164).

As previously noted, Lynn has contended that “agencies in which ... career personnel

have strong professional identities ... probably constitute the most difficult challenges to a political appointee.” (1985, 362). Mosher likewise argued that, as a result of professionalization, bureaucratic behavior is controlled by professional organizations and the values inculcated during training, as opposed to by government agencies themselves.

Yet Golden found evidence to suggest that professional norms may actually redound to an administration’s benefit. She found that the professional norms of attorneys at the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division led them to follow the directives of their political superiors, despite their personal disagreements with the administration. The lawyers who Golden interviewed told her that they thought they did a *better* job of arguing the administration’s cases than appointees – even though they generally did not agree with what they were actually arguing (2000, 96). Golden reported that the lawyers “were quite explicit that they viewed their job as winning the case and serving their client, and that in this case their client was the Reagan administration. They were quite explicit that they made the arguments they were told to make, even though they believed that many of the arguments were misguided.” (ibid., 99).

Golden attributed this to their legal training, which indoctrinates attorneys to make the best possible case for their clients (ibid., 103). Furthermore, she found that the impact of professional training is a key variable in how civil servants approach situations in which they disagree with appointees; the legal backgrounds of the Department of Justice lawyers (who were essentially trained to argue) also caused them to be more comfortable with voicing disagreements internally. By contrast, the engineers at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, who were trained to present scientific evidence, were less comfortable voicing their disagreements to appointees (ibid., 164-165). This suggests that it is necessary to study the professional norms of other occupations in order to determine how they affect civil service

compliance. My study will therefore build on this literature by studying government officials who work in public affairs.

### *Autonomy and Responsiveness*

What about the claims that the organizational cultures of bureaucrats are perverse? Merton and Hummel argued that civil servants would follow processes instead of focusing on people and outcomes. Yet a variety of evidence contradicts these claims. Brehm and Gates, for example, reported that “most of the federal employees feel a moderate degree of autonomy on the job, quite in contrast to popular speculations about bureaucrats in faceless jobs with little control over their own circumstances.” (1997, 98-99.) John Foster’s study of the extant literature found no evidence of bureaucratic rigidity; Melvin Kohn studied 3,101 male bureaucrats and found them to be *more* open-minded, receptive to change, and flexible than other men. (Goodsell 1994, 118).

Similarly, as previously noted, citizens themselves generally report satisfaction with their interactions with bureaucrats – even those at the much-maligned Internal Revenue Service! (Wood and Waterman 1994, 2; Aberbach and Rockman 2000, 197). The widely-accepted lack of a clear distinction between policy and administration and degree of discretion that civil servants enjoy, which were previously discussed, also clearly contradict these claims.

And what of the claims of Downs and others that bureaucracies will be characterized by inertia? They have been directly contradicted by the evidence presented by Brehm and Gates, Gore, and others that civil servants are responsive and desire challenging jobs. As Cohen argued, “contrary to popular perceptions, career managers get their kicks from the challenge of implementing new initiatives. Administering the same programs or functions year after year eventually wears thin, and the greatest professional growth and satisfaction usually come from

successfully launching new projects or programs.” (1996, 11).

***3. Civil servants are not largely driven by their personal ideologies; their concern for the reputation and efficacy of their organizations prevents them from sabotaging administration efforts.***

Contrary to the charges of Sanera and others that civil servants will shirk or sabotage the efforts of presidents with whom they personally disagree, psychologists tell us there is not a lot of evidence that attitudes drive behavior. For example, in a wide review of the extant literature, Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein noted that, while they question the methodology of many past studies, “reports of rather low or nonsignificant relations between attitudinal predictors and behavioral criteria have been accumulating for more than 40 years.” (1977, 888).

James Q. Wilson laid out a rather large body of work that concurs on this finding. For example, a study by Jeffrey Manditch Prottas found that the decisions of government welfare officers were driven by the exigencies of particular situations – not their personal attitudes (ibid., 52).. Similarly, Samuel Stouffer’s study of soldiers in World War II found no correlation between a soldier’s morale and his effectiveness (Wilson 1989, 46). Most relevantly, numerous scholars have failed to document a relationship between a person’s job satisfaction or morale and performance at work, as measured by productivity, absenteeism and tardiness (Ajzen and Fishbein 1977, 897).

The reason for this, Wilson said, is because “our behavior toward an object will be influenced not only by our evaluation of it but by the rewards and penalties associated with alternative courses of action.” These are controlled by those in authority – or, in the case of civil servants, by appointees. “When we realize that attitudes must compete with incentives for

influence over our behavior, it is not surprising that attitudes often lose out to the rewards we seek or the penalties we try to avoid.” (1989, 53).

Even if it turned out that civil servants were driven by their personal beliefs, it is unclear that this would lead to sabotage. For example, Herbert Kaufman’s famous study of the Forest Service found that the bureaucracy’s leadership was successful in *deliberately manipulating* the preferences of rangers, so that they aligned with those of their bosses. They used a variety of tools to accomplish this, including training; linking the fortunes of the rangers with those of the organization through promotion policies not based merely on tenure; transferring new rangers frequently to steep them in organizational culture; and promoting agency identification by including them in decision-making processes. (1960, 170, 176, 181-182, 185). Falsification of records, for example, was prevented by psychological preference controls: “The observer of the organization quickly gets the feeling such behavior would be regarded as not only immoral, but cowardly, unmanly, degrading to the individual and to the Service (whose members have a fierce pride in it), and that any man who practices it must end with contempt for himself for not having the courage to fight for those departures from policy that he believes right or to admit his errors when he is wrong.” (ibid., 130). As a result of this successful indoctrination and acculturation, rangers unconsciously pursued the preferences of their superiors. “From the Rangers’ point of view, they are not obeying orders or responding to cues when they take action on their districts; they are exercising their own initiative.” (ibid., 222).

Another reason that the personal ideologies of civil servants would not impact their work is if they were not particularly ideological people to begin with. Brewer and Maranto’s survey of government workers in 1987 found that political appointees were more likely to embrace the “zealot” role that Downs described than civil servants, which they ascribed to the appointees’

“background in politics and desire to implement the president’s policies.” (2000, 79, 81).

Likewise, after interviewing officials in agencies that President Reagan attempted to alter dramatically, Golden reported that “most of the careerists I studied did not seem to be motivated primarily by partisanship or ideology.” (2000, 166). Furthermore, Golden found that the civil servants she studied did not necessarily believe they had all the answers (ibid., 143). In fact, many of the civil servants told her that they had changed their personal views over time (ibid., 166). Aberbach and Rockman separately also reported evidence of ideological openness on the part of civil servants, finding that, between 1970-1987, as political appointees became more conservative, so too did civil servants (2000, 107, 109).

Stephen Hess, who studied government public affairs officers, likewise reported that “politicians assume that civil service employees have the same abiding interest in partisan politics that they have, but this is rarely the case. Career personnel often have an abiding interest in bureaucratic politics, the internal machinations of their agencies, which may or may not work to the advantage of political appointees but not because an administration is Republican or Democratic.” (1984, 12).

Furthermore, a variety of evidence suggests that civil servants would leave agencies if they did not agree with the goals they were pursuing. Glenn L. Starks, for example, has found that “when people become ‘citizens’ of the organization and find that they do not fit their work environments, they will tend to leave.” (2007, 61). Likewise, James L. Perry and Lois Recascino Wise argued that “if individuals are drawn to public organizations because of expectations they have about the rewards of public service but those expectations go unfulfilled, they are likely either to revise their preferences and objectives or to seek membership in organizations compatible with their interest.” (1990, 370). Similarly, when Ferrara and Ross interviewed civil



servants in 2004, their subjects reported that if they felt strongly against a policy, they would leave – not sabotage the initiative (2005, 46). Hummel concurred that “functionaries who cannot accept the restrictions of bureaucratic service leave, or are forced to leave, the bureaucracy.” (1977, 23).

Another reason why the personal policy beliefs of civil servants do not lead them to sabotage agency efforts is because they believe that doing so would harm the reputation and efficacy of their organizations. In Judith E. Michaels’ interviews with Senate-confirmed appointees in the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the appointees reported “that as a group, careerists want to help their bosses, in large part because they identify with their programs so much more than they identify with the political party of the incoming or outgoing administration.” (2005, 14). The interviews conducted by Ferrara and Ross with both appointees and civil servants in 2004 concurred on this finding. They reported that the civil servants cared about the reputations of their organizations and believed that these reputations would be enhanced if the appointees for whom they worked succeeded (2005, 49). Ferrara and Ross speculated that this might be the case because the success of the organization reflects well on civil servants themselves (*ibid.*, 50).

Golden’s research also confirmed this finding. In interviews with careerists at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), where a few civil servants were whistleblowers, she found that civil servants uniformly disdained their colleagues who leaked information to the press. They “attributed nothing but the basest motives” to these people, complaining to Golden that the individuals were disgruntled and publicity hungry and were undermining the agency’s work. (2000, 136). Golden reported that “the careerists I interviewed were more concerned with protecting the EPA’s reputation than with protesting policy change or challenging the Reagan

appointees.” (ibid., 136).

Robert Durant’s study of the implementation of natural resource policy in the Reagan administration likewise found that the concerns of civil servants for the interests of their organizations made them loath to sabotage appointees by appealing to outside actors such as Congress or the press (1992). Durant found that when civil servants disagree with appointees, they are likely only to make “limited appeals” by discussing their concerns with their bosses, since they fear that resistance would cause delays that would be harmful to their organizational missions (1990, 328). When civil servants offer greater resistance, Durant found that often “manipulated agreement” may be reached because the careerists fear that mobilizing outside groups would result in negative publicity that would be harmful to their organization (ibid., 323). When civil servants view changes that an administration pursues as costly, extensive, and illegitimate, they may mobilize outside actors, but they will also be eager to reach settlements with appointees because they will fear losing control to these outside players (ibid., 324).

Therefore, it is only when appointees pursue changes that civil servants view as detrimental to an agency’s core mission that civil servants will be willing to engage in protracted battles involving outside actors (ibid.). Of course, sometimes presidents actually are hostile to an agency’s core mission. However, as we will soon see, even in such instances bureaucratic rebellion tends to be muted. In general, however, as Rourke has argued, bureaucrats cannot work to undermine the president without undermining the agencies “with which their personal fortunes are linked”; the president “is the best salesman they have for the achievement of the agency’s goals and the continued replenishment of its resources.” (1984, 113).

In all, civil servants do not appear to be driven by personal or organizational interests – other than an interest in seeing their agencies succeed.

#### ***4. Civil servants are more responsive to the president than to other masters.***

Finally, contrary to the charge that civil servants will serve other masters, a host of studies of agency outputs have concluded that they are responsive to the president's agenda.

Studies have repeatedly found that while agencies do respond to other actors, they are *most* responsive to the president. For example, B. Dan Wood and Richard Waterman studied eight federal agencies, finding that they were responsive to the president, Congress, and the courts – but the most frequent mechanism for changing the behavior of the agencies was the appointees chosen by the president to lead them (1994, 74). The authors also studied the outputs of the EPA, finding that the agency responded to numerous actors, including the president, Congress, the judiciary, media, and interest groups, but “administrative resources and leadership are the most important determinants of adaptive movements by the bureaucracy.” (1993, 524). Additionally, Wood and James E. Anderson studied antitrust regulation, concluding that “in all cases, it is obvious that antitrust enforcement levels depend critically on ... a politics ... driven mainly by executive prerogatives.” (1993, 34). Numerous other studies concur in finding that regulatory agencies which are ostensibly independent are in fact responsive to the president (Brigman 1981, 244-245).

Other studies have confirmed the responsiveness to the president of bureaucracies that could have been expected to be the most resistant. For example, Thomas J. Weko studied the responsiveness of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to the Nixon and Reagan administrations, arguing that careerists in the social service agency could be expected to be hostile to the conservative agendas of these administrations. Instead, he found compliance to political appointees– arguing that “responsiveness can emerge even in the most challenging environments.” (1995, 128, 148). Ronald Randall's study of President Nixon's successful

changes to welfare policy, which included interviews with bureaucrats, found that his administration was able to control the bureaucracy through tactics, such as decentralizing control to regional bureaucrats who were more receptive to the policy changes the administration sought than Washington-based bureaucrats (1979, 802-803, 806). And, as previously noted, Golden's study of four agencies that President Reagan attempted to alter dramatically found that the compliance of civil servants actually increased during his tenure (2000, 23).

Scholars have also confirmed the responsiveness to the president of organizations designed specifically to resist political influence. Moe studied three independent commissions – the National Labor Relations Board, Federal Trade Commission, and Securities and Exchange Commission and found that their regulatory behavior changed in accordance with the positions of presidents (1982, 198; 1985, 1109). Joseph Stewart, Jr. and Jane S. Cromartie also studied the Federal Trade Commission, concurring that it issued more complaints of deceptive practices under Republican presidents, in keeping with presidential preferences (1982, 572). B. Dan Wood studied the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which in theory should also be insulated from political stimuli, finding instead that agency outputs corresponded with the preferences of presidents (1990, 503). John Kingdon's interviews with civil servants in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare found that when they disagreed with the Nixon administration's policies, they were not able to pursue their own priorities. They responded, rather, by continuing to develop ideas and proposals, which they could offer up when a more receptive administration came to power (1984, 32-33).

Karen Holt studied civil servants in the Department of Justice, who “almost universally supported more rigorous enforcement” than the Reagan administration pursued of the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act, which allows the Attorney General to file lawsuits

against states for unconstitutional conditions in institutions, such as prisons and hospitals for the mentally ill. While she did report a few cases of sabotage, such as leaks to Congress and the press and assistance to other agents, who could advance the goal of better enforcement, Holt concluded that “despite pervasive policy disagreement among holdover careerists, few resorted to sabotage. . . . Most carryover attorneys initially tried to stay and work within the system after the new Administration took office.” (1998, 98).

And, in perhaps the hardest test, Irene Rubin conducted case studies of offices whose programs the Reagan administration cut or eliminated, and found that “there was little, if any, footdragging by career officials in the implementation of policy.” She reported that she found “no evidence that new policies, such as turning programs over to the states or deregulation, were purposely delayed or ignored. The agencies’ employees did what they were supposed to do, including terminating their own programs.” (1985, 196). Rubin concluded that “if the president can successfully order agencies to terminate programs or to destroy their own capacity to manage or implement programs, then he can certainly control the bureaucracy.” (ibid., 23).

Of course, not all studies concur on these findings. Wood also studied the EPA, and found that civil servants pursued enforcements in contradiction of the goals of the Reagan administration (1988, 227-228). Yet Brian J. Cook’s criticism of Wood’s study is a glaring example of the limits of such attempts to measure a phenomenon as nuanced as the loyalty of staff exogenously and quantitatively. Cook noted that Wood’s model neglected to account for the influence that Congress had on the agency, leading to potentially faulty results (1989, 967).

Marc Allen Eisner and Kenneth J. Meier’s study of antitrust cases found that neither the President nor Congress were influential; outcomes were rather explained by the norms and values of the economists of the Antitrust Division (1990, 281, 283). Jeffrey E. Cohen’s study of

votes on the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) found that the appointees of a particular president do not vote as a group significantly more frequently than they vote with others, suggesting that appointment power was limited – though he noted that presidents have not prioritized the vetting of ICC appointees (1985, 61, 69). Kingdon reported that, in his interviews, some civil servants admitted leaking information to Congressional staff (1984, 34). Furthermore, as Dunn has argued, the claims of appointees that civil servants are not responsive must be taken into account (1997, 34). Nevertheless, the preponderance of evidence seems to point towards responsiveness to the president.

Maranto's studies are typical of a literature which often finds small, isolated accounts of civil service disloyalty that earn the offenders opprobrium within their own cohort. For example, "about a quarter of political appointees interviewed in 1999-2000 noted specific instances in which individual careerists hid information or were in other ways less than cooperative in supporting administration initiatives, though most saw such actions as isolated." (2005, 54). In a 1993-1994 survey, seven percent of civil servants voiced their dissent to interest groups, two percent to media, and seven percent to Congress (ibid., 105). Maranto found that "most career executives see such activity as not fully legitimate," and "organization whistleblowers lead lonely lives as nonpersons in their own agencies. Coworkers fear being seen with them." (ibid., 106). As Rourke concluded, "cases where career subordinates openly repudiate the decisions of their political superiors often receive great publicity, but they are exceptions to the general willingness of bureaucrats to go along with policies decided upon at a higher level." (1984, 112).

### **What Does Account for the Bad Reputation of Bureaucrats?**

Contrary to the expectations of the scholars in the earlier typology, these findings generally concur with Edwards' argument that "the recalcitrance of bureaucracy is such a strong

element of the conventional wisdom about how government works that it perseveres even in the face of widespread contradictory evidence.” (2001, 96). What accounts for this discrepancy?

Part of it may be a tendency to blame bureaucrats for a dysfunctional system created by other political actors. Moe, for example, argued that dysfunctional bureaucracies are the inevitable outcome of our political process. When bureaucracies are created, interest groups attempt to restrict them heavily through tools such as detailed mandates and decision-making procedures, even though this sacrifices some of the competence that would accrue from giving them more discretion, because the interest groups fear that future politicians will otherwise lead the bureaucracies in ways averse to their group’s goals. During the creation of a bureaucracy, however, these interest groups must unavoidably compromise with those who wish to derail the agency’s goals through mechanisms, such as monitoring and checks and balances. The executive will attempt to exert as much control as possible over the bureaucracy, while members of Congress will attempt to thwart such efforts. The bureaucracy that results from the push and pull of these forces will, unsurprisingly, not be designed for optimal performance (1989, 274-280).

Other scholars concur that the dysfunctions of the bureaucracy are due to the perverse organizational structures that arise under our constitutional system of separate bodies vying for power (Aberbach and Rockman 2000, 187; Meier 1997, 197; Wilson 1989, 376). Wilson traced increased attempts to control revenues, productive factors, and agency goals by Congress, the courts, politicians, and interest groups since the 1970s, further constraining the bureaucracy and hindering performance (1989, 71). Each of these groups demands specific rules for governing the bureaucracy, which are not reconciled with one another (*ibid.*, 363). Goodsell likewise concluded that the problem is that the bureaucracy is given “inconsistent, contradictory, and hence unachievable goals and tasks.” (1994, 77; see also Meier 1997, 196). Wilson identified this

American preoccupation with rule-making as unique in comparison with other countries – an outcome of the distrust of government power whose roots stretch back to our nation’s founding (Bruce 1984, 6; Goodsell 1994, 11; Wilson 1989, 335; Wood and Waterman 1994, 2).

Another problem is the sheer size of the government. As Emmet J. Hughes, an aide to President Eisenhower, said: “the vast machinery of national leadership – the tens of thousands of levers and switches and gears – simply do not respond to the impatient jab of a finger or the angry pounding of a fist.” (Cronin 1980, 241). An additional problem may be insufficient bureaucratic resources (Rourke 1984, 161-162; Edwards 1983, 204). Indeed, the very fact that bureaucracies have been utilized as scapegoats for so many decades can only diminish their ability to fight for the resources they need.

What do politicians do when agencies they have so constituted and constrained produce perverse outcomes? They blame the bureaucrats themselves – rhetoric which itself further contributes to the poor reputations of civil servants (Wood and Waterman 1994, 2). Other scholars trace the public relations problem faced by these officials to the fact that, in contrast to Europe, where civil servants were long a respected elite (with traditions ranging from the intelligent amateur in Britain to Germany’s well-trained specialists), in America the bureaucracy developed after the creation of our democracy (Wood and Waterman 1994, 4). Nevertheless, contrary to their reputations, the above findings suggest that civil servants are generally, though not always, competent and loyal.

### **What About Appointee Loyalty?**

It is finally important to note it is not in fact clear that appointees themselves will always be loyal to the president. Cohen, for example, has argued that the appointee selection process, in which presidents hire individuals in part to ingratiate themselves with members of Congress,



interest groups, and other actors, necessarily reduces the loyalty of appointees to the president. “To strike the necessary compromises, he often ends up selecting or approving individuals who are *not* loyal to him, or who are more loyal to someone else, or who have policy agendas at odds with his own.” (1996, 12). Furthermore, Cohen pointed out, if an appointee owes his loyalty to the White House, (s)he may not obey immediate superiors within his or her agency, ultimately making it more difficult to implement presidential programs (ibid., 13). Lewis also drew an important distinction between the type of loyalty that campaign workers have demonstrated to the president personally “in a costly way” (such as perhaps in lost sleep!) and ideological fealty, which is something different (2011, 57).

Furthermore, Hecla has argued that policy experts today are part of “issue networks,” and appointees from such networks may be more loyal to their networks than to the president (1978, 106, 118). If a president removes an appointee who disagrees with him, Hecla said, the president is likely to end up with another member of the same network who holds similar beliefs (ibid., 122). Furthermore, in a study of the loyalty of cabinet secretaries – whose public affiliation with the president makes it likely that they are the most loyal of appointees – Anthony Bertelli and Christian Grose found that, in their congressional testimony between 1991-2002, secretaries of agriculture publicly disagreed with the president six percent of the time; secretaries of labor disagreed with the president ten percent of the time, and secretaries of commerce disagreed with the president twenty-four percent of the time (2007, 237).

Furthermore, David Cohen has argued that appointees use their offices to promote themselves (1996, 30-31); unlike civil servants, they do not enjoy tenure and are therefore likely more concerned with their future career prospects.

It is thus far from clear that appointees will be uniformly loyal to the president.

Nevertheless, to the extent that appointees are particularly loyal, how does this differential affect the interests of the president?

### **The Impact of Appointee Zeal**

The danger of too much loyalty is that it may turn into an overzealousness, which ultimately proves detrimental to the executive. Many modern presidential scandals (such as, for example, Iran-Contra and Watergate) have actually resulted from *too much* staff loyalty (Rudalevidge 2002, 21). A more recent example of this phenomenon are the senior aides to New Jersey Governor Chris Christie who ordered that lanes on the nation's busiest bridge be closed, ensnaring traffic jams for days in the town of Fort Lee, New Jersey, in an alleged effort to retaliate against the town's Democratic mayor for not endorsing the Republican governor – causing a massive political scandal which weakened the governor (Zernike 2014). As Aberbach and Rockman have argued, “the urge to command and centralize often fails to recognize that political impulses should be subjected to tests of sobriety. Though there are a good many reasons to argue on behalf of the basic idea of “neutral competence” and against the politicization of all executive organizations, the most fundamental one that a president ought to consider is the avoidance of error and illegality that have wracked recent presidencies.” (1999, 171). Pfiffner likewise argued that it is the overzealousness of appointees – more than the efforts of *political opponents* – that have been “the greatest threats to the reputation and political interests of recent presidents.” (1999, 6).

Furthermore, legions of scholars have demonstrated that, in America's constitutional system, when the president pushes too far, he is usually checked by the other branches of government (Wilson 1989, 259). In the famous formulation of Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, when the president overreaches, upset citizens and advocacy groups pull “fire alarms”

and Congress intervenes (1984).

For example, Robert Durant's study of the Reagan administration's natural resource policy confirmed that the more that the administration pursued policy change administratively, the more likely it was for Congress, clients, and "an aroused, litigious public" to pull fire alarms (1992, 76). Richard Waterman likewise found that when wielded overzealously, the tools of the administrative presidency provoked backlash that ultimately *reduced* presidential influence (1989, 189). Evan Ringquist also found that executive attempts to control the EPA in the end reduced political control by mobilizing agency clientele groups (1995, 336).

Additionally, Kingdon's interviews with nearly 250 appointees, civil servants, congressional staffers, members of interest groups, and others involved in the policy process established rather firmly that presidents cannot unilaterally drive policy change (1984, 4, 23, 128). To become viable, ideas must first be "softened" – a process of acclimating both policy communities and the public at large to new ideas, which typically takes years. If a key event such as a crisis or a change in the political environment occurs before an idea has gone through this softening process, change will not be viable (*ibid.*, 128). Thus, presidents who use appointees to attempt blindly to ram through personal agendas lacking wider support are simply unlikely to be successful over the long term.

Ultimately, achieving lasting change requires building political consensus, not appointing zealots to pursue extra-constitutional measures (Rudalevidge 2002, 161; Pfiffner 1999, 19; Rourke 1992, 544). As Rourke argued,

the hard fact that presidents must also confront is that dutiful responsiveness to administration goals may not actually be the greatest service that appointees in executive

agencies can render the White House. Although most presidential aides would like to see all agency appointees demonstrate such blind loyalty to their chief executive, the ultimate success of any administration may depend less on the unswerving allegiance of its appointees to the President than it does on their skill and dexterity in being responsive not only to Congress but also to the configuration of groups that their agency serves.” (1992, 544).

It therefore seems to be in the president’s interests to pursue the kinds of moderate policies with broad consensus which actually last in our pluralist system. The evidence suggests that this is just what *civil servants* are well placed to help presidents do.

Finally, the politicization of the executive branch may weaken the government’s overall legitimacy, to which the president is inextricably tied. Ezra Suleiman has noted that “one of the crucial elements that contributes to or detracts from responsive, accountable, effective, and legitimate government is the instrument through which all governments exercise their authority – the state bureaucracy.” (2003, 7). Thus, if the government is perceived by citizens to be political instead of neutral, its legitimacy will be weakened – to the detriment of the credibility of the chief executive.

### **The Lack of Comparative Evidence**

Thus, while there is evidence to question the wisdom of politicization, what is missing from the literature is studies of appointees and civil servants who are working in the *same* positions, in order to draw reliable comparisons of their efficacy and loyalty to the president. My

study will begin to address this gap by interviewing both civil servants and appointees who worked in public affairs roles for the same agency.

### **Conclusion**

A careful review of the literature thus leaves serious reason to question the wisdom of politicization. A variety of evidence suggests that civil servants perform more competently on the job than political appointees. It might still make sense for presidents to politicize if appointees offer greater loyalty, which redounds to the chief executive's advantage – but a wide body of literature suggests that civil servants are, on the whole, unlikely to shirk or sabotage. Meanwhile, it is not at all clear that appointees will all be loyal to the president, and overzealous appointees may cause serious harm to an administration. Yet none of these previous scholars have studied appointees and civil servants working in the same agency and position in order to determine which group serves best under particular circumstances.

In light of this evidence, I will interview political appointees and civil servants who work in public affairs for the Treasury Department in order to assess their relative competence and efficacy and to test my hypothesis that the civil servants will be found to be both more competent and no less loyal to the president than the appointees. As the next chapter will discuss, the interviews with agency public affairs officers will also shed light on another important phenomenon: the “permanent campaign.”

## Chapter 2: Literature Review: Public Affairs Officers in Government Agencies

### The Permanent Campaign

In 1982, Sidney Blumenthal famously argued that our nation's political leaders now conduct a "permanent campaign." Blumenthal, who would later serve as a senior aide to President Clinton, wrote that "under the permanent campaign governing is turned into a perpetual campaign. Moreover, it remakes government into an instrument designed to sustain an elected official's public popularity. It is the engineering of consent with a vengeance." (23)

Blumenthal described how political consultants are hired to get politicians elected, and then "brought into the sanctums of government to use the prerogatives of office" to continue using the same campaign techniques – such as playing to the fears and emotions of the people, attempting to capitalize on tragedies, covering up bad policies by diverting attention towards images and ideology, prioritizing issues based upon the political advantages they offer, capturing voters by entertaining them, and focusing on style over substance (ibid., 26, 126, 246, 250, 331, 23, 164, 171). "The citizenry is viewed as a mass of fluid voters who can be appeased by appearances, occasional drama, and clever rhetoric." (ibid., 24).

A key feature of the "permanent campaign" is the constant courting of public opinion, which Jeffrey Tulis (1987) and Hugh Heclo (2000) note that the Constitution was, in some ways, carefully crafted to prevent. One of the key concerns of America's founders was that political leaders be sufficiently insulated from day-to-day shifts in public opinion in order to be able to govern responsibly. In *The Federalist* #1, for example, Alexander Hamilton warned of the possibility illustrated by history that politicians would begin "their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants." (Madison, Hamilton and Jay 1987, 89).

The Constitution was designed to keep the people at arm's length from day-to-day governing and instead allow them to weigh in during periodic elections, in order to promote what Heclo termed "deliberative responsiveness" in our leaders (2000, 31). Heclo noted that Americans at the time of our founding believed that previous republics had failed because ambitious politicians told the people what they wanted to hear. This led to factional strife and chaos, which culminated in dictatorship and tyranny (ibid., 5). Contrary to the intentions of our Founders, today, Heclo argued, we are governed by an "Anti-Constitution [which] prescribes instant responsiveness to the continuous monitoring of the people's mass opinion and mood." (ibid., 18).

According to Heclo, politicians today focus on instrumental responsiveness to the people's whims, rather than teaching them, Franklin D. Roosevelt-style, about the long-term challenges America faces and the sacrifices necessary to overcome them (ibid., 30-34). Of course, Heclo's ideal view of democracy is problematic to the degree that it views citizens themselves as generally incapable of advocating responsible policy decisions and therefore reliant upon more enlightened leaders to ascertain their true interests. Nevertheless, Heclo argued that the performance of politicians has become more important than the content of what they say, and he is justified in his concern that, as a result, citizens have been left confused (ibid., 31). Theodore Lowi has warned that the president's focus on the presentation of appearances has become so serious that it threatens the future of the nation itself (1984, 20).

Furthermore, Heclo has noted that whereas the governing process should be collaborative and grounded in rational deliberation with the end of arriving at truth, campaigns are designed to mute one's opponents and defeat enemies through the use of images and emotions (2000, 11-15). Accordingly, disagreements are overplayed and politics is infused with an unnecessary hostility.

In fact, the word “campaign” itself invokes the imagery of warfare: the French army took to the *champagne*, or fields, for operations (ibid., 30, 33, 7). As a result of this conflict, “less dramatic, but more realistic, chances for success” via compromise are neglected (Edwards 2003, 249). While an electorate inured to emotional appeals would be equally disturbing, all of this drama and oversimplification clearly reduces the prospects for serious policy deliberation and compromise.

In addition to poor policy and bitter partisanship, the permanent campaign is also said to result in official deception. In Scott McClellan’s memoir of his time as Press Secretary to President George W. Bush, he admitted that the Bush administration indeed conducted a “permanent campaign,” and argued that it had resulted in a new and unprecedented level of deception in politics (2008, xxiii). McClellan wrote: “Washington has become the home of the permanent campaign, a game of endless politicking based on the manipulation of shades of truth, partial truths, twisting of the truth, and spin. Governing has become an appendage of politics rather than the other way around, with electoral victory and the control of power as the sole measures of success.” (ibid., xiii).

McClellan reported that the Bush administration regularly manipulated the truth in order to achieve short-term advantage in the polls – a strategy that ultimately proved disastrous for both the American people and the President himself (ibid., 66, 77). He said that, for presidential advisers, “fear of short-term political embarrassment leads them to reflexively manipulate, hide, and distort the truth.” (ibid., 88). For example, McClellan reported that the administration was guilty of “shading the truth” regarding the evidence and justification for the war in Iraq, and argued that the President’s biggest motive – spreading democracy in the Middle East – was carefully disguised from the American people (ibid., 131-132).



This continual deception also resulted in bitter partisan polarization, which precluded the administration from governing effectively. McClellan warned that “allowing the permanent campaign culture to remain in control may not take us into another unnecessary war, but it will continue to limit the opportunity for careful deliberation, bipartisan compromise, and meaningful solutions to the major problems all Americans want to see solved.” (ibid., 313). Ironically, McClellan noted that the campaign was ultimately a disservice to the president himself, severely tarnishing his reputation. “Ultimately, that machine worked not only to spin the media and defeat our opponents but to spin and defeat ourselves.” (ibid., 311).

Yet Blumenthal, Heclo and McClellan never indicated precisely how deeply this campaign penetrates: Is it conducted only from the White House, or are government agencies also involved?

In *Polling to Govern: Public Opinion and Presidential Leadership*, Diane Heith studied the archives of presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and George H.W. Bush, and found that, within their White Houses, the results of public opinion polls were shared with, on average, about thirty top staffers, and not with cabinet heads (2004, 39). She therefore concluded that “polling did not penetrate the bureaucracy.” (ibid., 98). Yet this research needs to be brought up to date with evidence from more modern presidencies; McClellan, for example, reported that the administration of George W. Bush took the permanent campaign “to a higher level” than the Clinton administration (2008, 311). Furthermore, Heith’s work cannot account for the possibility that cabinet agencies themselves might be conducting or utilizing public opinion polls, which would not have been captured in her examination of presidential records.

Like Heith, Mordecai Lee – an expert in government agency communications – has claimed that government agencies engage in little survey research, but he does not cite evidence

of this claim. For Lee, however, this is “a shame. Private corporations spend gobs of money on survey research to be sure that they understand the views of the public.” (2012, 17).

More recently, McClellan clearly indicated that the permanent campaign has spread beyond the White House. While he was vague regarding its boundaries, he left open the possibility that it has permeated the bureaucracy. For example, he indicated that deception, which he characterizes as a key tenet of the campaign, “was not isolated to one event or even to the Bush White House. It permeates our national discourse. And ... it has become an accepted way of winning the partisan wars for public opinion and an increasingly destructive part of Washington’s culture.” (2008, 4). McClellan acknowledged that “of course, deception in politics is nothing new. What’s new is the degree to which it now permeates our national discourse.” (ibid., xiii).

It is clear that the American people also perceive this change. The Pew Research Center for People & the Press reported that public trust in government reached a record low in the Obama administration. While in November 1958, seventy-three percent of Americans indicated that they generally trusted their government in Washington, in October 2013 the number had fallen to nineteen percent (2013).

The permanent campaign is also an emerging trend among communications professionals in the corporate sector. In its most recent survey of top corporate communicators, Corporate Communications International reported as one of its key findings that “political, financial, [and] technological uncertainty ... has led to running corporate communication like a never-ending political campaign.” (Goodman et al. 2013).

However, if government agencies are using such polls, there is reason to believe that such efforts might not be readily visible, given the opprobrium attached to any hint of the use of polls

in the governance process. As Heith observed, “as much a third rail as altering Social Security, no staffer, president, or pollster wants to admit to using polls to shape or influence leadership while in the White House.” (2004, 13-14). “Moreover, no organizational chart of any White House highlights formal structures or guidelines that detail the use of public opinion in presidential activities.” (ibid., 14). It therefore seems probable that staffers in government agencies – which are supposed to be less political than the White House – would take similar or greater steps to conceal their use of polls if they indeed availed themselves of them.

Furthermore, Heith’s study found that “information on issues, rather than performance, represented the bulk of exchanges” between White House staff on poll data (ibid., 49). This would suggest that government agencies – whose work is issue-based to an even greater degree than the White House – might use the same approach to utilizing polls to gauge public opinion on their issue areas.

Heith found that the presidents she studied used polls not to change their stances based upon public opinion, but rather to attempt to move the public in the directions they preferred, leading her to conclude that the use of polling “has not trumped or triumphed over traditional relationships and approaches to governing.” (2004, 136). Her finding echoed Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro’s 2000 study of healthcare debates since the 1970s, which found that politicians use polls as a resource for building support among Americans for the policies the politicians already favor (xv). However, in 2008, McClellan suggested that this may have changed. He reported that “opinion polling is used not only to read the mood of the electorate and guide political leaders in the ways they communicate their messages, but also, at times, to determine the policies they will advocate.” (64).

In my interviews, the descriptions by government agency officials of the techniques they

engage in will provide important answers to this question of whether they are today on a permanent campaign – and, if so, precisely what it entails.

### **A History of Suspicion of Agency Public Affairs Officers**

As previously discussed, it is particularly important to understand the work of government agency public affairs officers, given their critical role as gatekeepers in America's democratic system.

The jobs of agency public affairs officials are held in such suspicion that the work they do is, technically, illegal. Under a U.S. law passed in 1913, in government agencies, “no money appropriated by ... any ... Act shall be used for the compensation of any publicity expert unless specifically appropriated for that purpose.” (Kosar 2005, 786.) The law is the lingering result of the outrage of Rep. Frederick Gillette upon reading an announcement of a civil service exam for the position of “publicity expert, for men only.” The person in this advertised post in the Agriculture Office of Public Roads would be responsible for preparing material for the media and “secure the publication of such items in various periodicals and newspapers” – activities which Gillette viewed as an improper attempt at propagandizing (Herold 1981, 15). Government agencies have, of course, hired increased numbers of “publicity experts” ever since this time – simply skirting the law by calling their jobs by other names.

Since the passage of this law, Congress has continued to attempt to curb the practice of public relations in federal agencies (Lee 2011). Especially memorably, during the 1950s, the House Committee on Government Operations created the Subcommittee on Government Information, popularly known as the “Moss Subcommittee,” which expressed outrage over publicity operations occurring in federal agencies (Nimmo 1964, 173). Two decades later, Senator J. William Fulbright personally wrote an entire book criticizing the Pentagon's public

relations activities (1970). More recently, bills introduced in both the Senate and House in early 2005 proposed imposing penalties for government officials who propagandize (Kosar 2008, 298, 304). Congress continues regularly to include language in laws indicating that “no part of any appropriation contained in this Act shall be used for publicity or propaganda purposes not authorized by the Congress.” (Kosar 2012b, 184).

As David Morgan has noted, Congress has continually worked to build up its own public relations staff and capabilities, at the same time as it has tried to curb the very same practices by government agencies (1986, 25). But, as Kevin Kosar of the Congressional Information Service has described, despite more recent congressional efforts to limit government “propaganda,” barriers to congressional action include the difficulty of quantifying public relations expenditures within agencies, the difficulty of defining the line between public relations and propaganda, and the fact that the Department of Justice, within the executive branch itself, would have to initiate charges against the executive branch for transgressions (2005, 792-796).

If, as discussed in the Introduction, the American people have a right to information about their government, which is necessary to the functioning of democracy, why would lawmakers attempt to limit the work of the officials responsible for providing the people with such information? J.A.R. Pimlott argued that “opposition to government publicity ... often springs from opposition to the particular purpose for which it is being used” – and from congressional fears that the publicity will give the executive increased power relative to the legislature (Pimlott 1951, 83, 88; see also Rourke 1961, 186; Lee 2011). But is this suspicion justified? Just how powerful are agency public affairs officers? And how do they wield the powers they possess?

## **How Powerful are Public Affairs Officials?**

The potential power of public affairs officials is suggested by President Lincoln's famous claim that "public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail, without it nothing can succeed. He who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or decisions possible or impossible to execute." (Cohen 1981, 16). But how much power do public affairs officers in government agencies actually have to shape public opinion?

### *Influencing Media Coverage*

One way public affairs officers shape opinion is by shaping media reports. First, government public affairs officers serve as predominant sources in media coverage. For example, Stephen Hess found that reporters who cover the national government reach out to government public affairs officials regarding about half of their stories (1984, 5). In 1982, Morgan sampled nine leading daily newspapers and found that while Congress provided about a quarter of their stories, the Presidency and executive branch were responsible for seventy percent, with two-thirds of executive branch news coming from agencies and departments (1986, 27-29, 33.) Similarly, Judy VanSlyke Turk conducted a study of six state government agencies in Louisiana, and found that newspaper reporters utilized half of the information that public information officers provided to them (1986, 17). Finally, a study by Leon Sigal of foreign and national news stories that ran on the front page of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* between 1949-1969 found that more than fifty-eight percent of the information reported came from official sources, such as press releases, press conferences, and speeches, and an additional 15.7 percent from informal sources, such as briefings and leaks. Only 25.8 percent of the information came from enterprise reporting, such as a reporter's interviews and spontaneous events (1973, 120-

121). Sigal did not address which stories were higher profile or attracted more attention. However, he concluded that “at present, news space is still more readily available to high administration officials than it is to spokesmen of any other organization or institution in the society.” (ibid., 190). Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese have likewise found that “news content consists largely of statements from official sources.” (1996, 129).

This is the case because, as John Zaller noted, “one of the clearest findings to emerge from the scholarly literature on the press is that reporters will regard as newsworthy that which their ‘legitimate’ sources say is newsworthy.” (1992, 315). Furthermore, as Francis Rourke noted, “their statements come from an official source and thus may have a credibility they would not otherwise possess.” (1961, 206). Of course, this status of newsworthiness and credibility helps government public affairs officers to not only shape what is reported but also to construct “the context within which all other information is evaluated.” (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 178).

Furthermore, by serving as predominant sources and influencers of media reporting, government public affairs officers crowd out the ability of other actors to do so. As Dan Nimmo has noted, “public explanation of policy with or without propagandistic intent competes with other explanations publicizing conflicting policies.” (1964, 20). This is the case because, as Norton E. Long has observed, facts are rarely presented neutrally; “indeed, if they are to do any useful office in clarifying the real alternatives of public policy, they must foreclose some alternatives, and in doing so give umbrage to their proponents.” (1954, 22). As a result, Dave Gelders and Oyvind Ihlen have noted that “there is a risk that the government becomes too powerful and that its voice is privileged in comparison with that of the opponents of a particular policy.” (2010, 61). There is also a risk that media access is used to promote partisan policies (ibid., 59). Some have argued that the use of such resources also confers a significant advantage

to incumbent administrations in electoral races (McCamy 1939, 15).

For example, Kosar has argued that the use of government funds to promote the president or his policies is problematic because the money could otherwise be used to focus on public policy; because “such promotional activities may reduce the ability of the public to assess the wisdom of particular policies and, by implication, the competency of public officials and the president, which may have electoral ramifications;” and because it gives the president an advantage that threatens to disrupt the balance of power between the three branches of government (2005, 786).

Beyond the advantages of the perceived greater newsworthiness and legitimacy of the information they convey, public affairs officers also derive advantages from the fact that “reporters’ hunger for news – a commodity essential to the performance of their professional task – makes them very vulnerable to being used by an agency to disseminate information that will reflect favorably upon it.” (Rourke 1984, 172). In particular, reporters may be unwilling to aggressively challenge the statements of an agency public affairs officer or to refuse to cover news the agency is actively pitching because they depend upon maintaining relationships with their government public affairs contacts in order to secure the information they need to do their jobs. Government public affairs officers also control access to information, which, if given exclusively to a reporter, gives the correspondent’s media outlet an edge over rivals in a highly competitive media market – yet another reason for reporters to stay in the good graces of their official sources.

Another advantage that Shoemaker and Resse have described public affairs officers as wielding to their advantage is their ability to “[monopolize] the journalists’ time so that they don’t have an opportunity to seek out sources with alternative views.” (1996, 178). A related



form of power that government public affairs officials wield is their ability to provide “usable information that is easier and cheaper to use than that from other sources.” (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 178). Oscar Gandy has used the concept of “information subsidies” to describe this form of influence (1982, 30). By providing journalists with information in a form that is readily useable, government public affairs officers reduce the “costs” (in time and money) to reporters of newsgathering. “Faced with time constraints, and the need to produce stories that will win publication, journalists will attend to, and make use of, subsidized information that is of a type and form that will achieve that goal. By reducing the costs faced by journalists in satisfying organizational requirements, the subsidy giver increases the probability that the subsidized information will be used.” (ibid., 627). Mark Fishman has therefore argued that the source of government’s publicity power is this ability to “lure” reporters with “free, safe, easily available, predictable amounts of raw materials for news.” (1980, 153).

Thus, public affairs officials in government agencies are uniquely positioned to influence news reporting because of the perceived newsworthiness and legitimacy attached to their official positions, the dependence of reporters upon continued relationships with such officials in order to do their jobs, their ability to keep reporters occupied so that they do not seek other sources, and their ability to offer news to reporters at a cheaper “cost” than other sources. Accordingly, in 1961, V.O. Key claimed that “the picture of the press collectively as the wielder of great power on its own initiative does not fit the facts” (394). By this argument, media managers

should no more be held accountable for the materials that flow through their channels than should managers of transportation concerns be blamed for the quality of the printed matter they transport from place to place. The tone and quality of the content of the

media tend to be mightily influenced, if not fixed, by those who manufacture news and by those who fix the nature of other politically relevant content available for the media. (ibid., 395).

The ability to influence media reporting is a profound source of power for two reasons. First, agencies which are able to bolster their popularity in the press gain immense political power. As Rourke has argued, agencies that enjoy widespread support in public opinion become practically untouchable: it is difficult for Congress or the President to oppose them (1984, 44).

Second, as Walter Lippmann recognized in *Public Opinion*, in today's world, it is impossible for each of us to obtain most information by firsthand experience. "Each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth's surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately. Of any public event that has wide effects we see at best only a phase and an aspect." (1966, 53). We have thus come to depend upon the press for much of what we know about the world (ibid., 203). Thus, the ability to influence news reporting is in a great sense the ability to define reality for the American people. Studies on agenda setting, priming and framing effects illustrate exactly how the media content shaped by public affairs officers comes to influence the beliefs and behavior of U.S. citizens.

#### *Agenda Setting, Priming and Framing Effects*

The reason that the influence of public affairs officers on the media is such a profound source of power is because myriad studies confirm that media reports have agenda-setting affects (influencing what issues Americans believe are important), priming effects (influencing the weight Americans place on issues), and framing effects (influencing how Americans perceive issues). (Iyengar 1991, 132-133). While, in the case of my study, many of those who follow the

Treasury closely may be financial industry experts who have sophisticated views less susceptible to these mechanisms, the Treasury's comments on the overall state of the economy may influence the views of the public at large through these mechanisms.

First, studies confirm that media coverage is a significant shaper of American public opinion. For example, John Zaller's study of the ways in which public opinion is formed found that Americans do not possess fixed opinions, which they simply share with pollsters. Rather, he found, "most people really aren't sure what their opinions are on most political matters ... because there are few occasions ... in which they are called upon to formulate and express political opinions. So, when confronted by rapid-fire questions in a public opinion survey, they make up attitude reports as best they can as they go along. But because they are hurrying, they are heavily influenced by whatever ideas happen to be at the top of their minds." (1992, 76). Media coverage is, of course, a key determinant of what is top of mind. One of the reasons that Americans are particularly susceptible to arguments they read or hear in the media is because "most Americans do not rate very highly on political awareness," and therefore "citizens will be unlikely to exhibit high levels of resistance to arguments that are inconsistent with their values, interests, or other predispositions." (ibid., 59).

A small sample of studies suffice to illustrate the point: One study by Michael MacKuen found that the political priorities of individuals change as a result of the information they acquire; thus personal agendas "depend more on content of the information environment than on internalized standards." (1984, 386). G. Ray Funkhouser found that the volume of coverage in major newsmagazines correlated strongly with the importance that Americans attributed to particular issues (1973, 71). Benjamin Page, Robert Shapiro, and Glenn Dempsey found that television coverage was responsible for a large percentage of changes in the policy preferences

of Americans (1987, 23). A study by Shanto Iyengar, Donald Kinder, Mark Peters, and Jon Krosnick found that “by drawing attention to certain national problems while ignoring others, television news programs help define the standards by which presidents are evaluated.” (1984, 778). Americans exposed to media coverage of energy, defense, and inflation were more likely to rate the President overall in the same way they rated him on these issues (ibid., 783). Similarly, Iyengar studied media reports on a range of issues, including crime, terrorism and poverty, and found that the ways in which media reports framed issues influenced how Americans attributed responsibility (1991, 3).

Finally, David P. Fan created statistical models of the formation of public opinion on a range of issues, such as whether the United States should spend more money on national defense between 1977-1986 and whether unemployment or inflation was a more important issue in 1981-1984. He found that the media is the principal source of influence on public opinion (1988, 4). While any individual story tends to have minimal effects on public opinion, Fan found that it is the cumulative effect of all of the stories that is powerful (ibid., 3). He concluded that public opinion is not a check on elite behavior; rather, elites use the media to convey their messages and public opinion tends to reflect the messages conveyed in the press (ibid., 140).

### **How do they Wield their Power?**

It is thus clear that public affairs officers in government agencies wield enormous power to influence media reporting, which in turn may bolster the political power of their organizations and shape American public opinion. Of course, such power might be used towards laudable or questionable ends. As far back as 380 B.C., Plato drew a distinction in the *Gorgias* between the rhetoric of politicians designed for the good of the people and rhetoric used simply to flatter and achieve personal gain (Plato 2009). How do modern government public affairs officers utilize

the power they possess: to responsibly provide the information citizens have the right and need to possess in order for our democracy to function, or to deceive the people – whether malevolently or, as Machiavelli would argue, for the people’s own good? Is their chief role to inform the public or to “spin” for the administration’s policies?

*To Strengthen the Administration’s Power Position?*

In his history of public relations in the United States, Stuart Ewen traced the ways in which public relations techniques have often been practiced by government officials to “justify and package their interests in terms of the common good,” thereby supporting their own power positions (1996, 34). Edward Bernays, the double nephew of Freud credited as one of the fathers of the practice of public relations in the United States, for example, “described public relations as a response to a transhistoric concern: the requirement, for those people in power, to shape the attitudes of the general population. For Bernays, public relations reflected the refinement of techniques developed to serve ancient purposes.” (ibid., 11).

The field of public relations developed in the early years of the twentieth century, initially utilizing factual arguments to reply to the concerns of labor and media “muckrackers” about big business. But practitioners soon realized that, as American philosopher William James outlined in his 1907 book, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Old Ways of Thinking*, truth is unstable; things could be made to be true, for example, in the way events are structured (ibid., 39-40). One of the first practitioners of public relations, Ivy Lee, applied this approach to his craft. “If suitable facts could be assembled and then projected into the vast “amphitheatre” of public consciousness, he reasoned, they could *become truth*. Harnessed to the idea that *the truth is something that can be merchandised to the public* was an approach to the standards of factual evidence that represented a prophetic break from their Enlightenment roots.” (ibid., 80).

At a time of fear that the working class revolts happening elsewhere on the globe might spread to the United States and trepidation about the behavior of publics in mass democracies, early practitioners of public relations in government discovered that “truths” could be presented in the service of their aims. During World War I, the U.S. Committee on Public Information, established by President Wilson and headed by George Creel, undertook a massive effort to mobilize public support for the war effort – the likes of which the world had never before seen. The country’s filmmakers, artists, journalists, advertising industry and other groups were mobilized to create pro-war works. Opinion leaders in local communities, known as “Four-Minute Men,” were trained to give speeches to their neighbors. Often, the committee appealed to the emotions, rather than the intellects, of the American people. The enemy was presented as lurking everywhere; one map of the United States showed the German names that conquerors would give to American cities if the nation lost the war (ibid., 124).

By the 1920s, public relations practitioners became skilled at appealing to the unconscious. Practitioners studied psychological manipulation to find the unconscious triggers they could exploit to steer public passions (ibid., 127, 132). The power of pictures was harnessed to elicit emotional responses, while pre-empting critical thinking (ibid., 210). Such manipulation was justified with claims that most citizens were irrational. The rational few who worked in public relations would therefore structure the thinking of the masses, in order to save the people from themselves (ibid., 144-145). The introduction of polling offered another public relations technique: polls could be structured to elicit virtually any desired response. The poll could then be used as justification that its sponsor was acting in the public interest – resulting in what Ewen characterizes as “reverse democracy” (ibid., 189).

Ewen allowed that government officials have not always approached citizens as irrational

creatures to be subconsciously manipulated to serve their own power interests. He credited President Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, with attempting to educate citizens and appeal to them as rational thinkers in his Fireside Chats (ibid., 254-255). Likewise, the photographs commissioned by the Farm Security Administration during the New Deal era, widely covered in the nation's media, helped to humanize and dignify the country's poor – engaging the nation on critical issues and helping to overcome previous representations of the poor as others to be feared (ibid., 264, 277-278, 282). Ewen similarly characterized the 1970s as a time when public relations professionals responded to African Americans, women, and other groups who were newly asserting their rights by targeting them with specific messages.

But each time the pendulum has swung in this direction, Ewen said, it has always swung back to practices, which attempt to preserve privileges through manipulation, demagoguery, and tricks (ibid., 399-400). Furthermore, public relations professionals responded to the movements of the 1970's by narrowly targeting different groups, resulting in an increased fragmentation of American society that made it even harder for the public to assert its collective interests (ibid., 406, 411).

Critics of modern-day government public affairs officials charge them with similarly sinister practices. Former *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich's account of President George W. Bush's handling of the Iraq war suggested that not much has changed since Vietnam. Rich accused the administration of using "inflated claims about Saddam's WMDs and Iraq-Qaeda ties [which] were outright lies or the subconscious misreading of intelligence by officials with an *idee fixe*" in order to sell the war (2006, 218). He argued that the President himself exaggerated other facts, such as the number of U.S. partners and Iraqi troops (ibid., 178). Rich documented numerous other instances in which the administration conveyed false information, such as details

of the rescue of Private First Class Jessica Lynch who was missing in Iraq; facts surrounding the death of professional football player Pat Tillman, who the administration claimed was killed by enemy fire but later admitted died from “friendly fire;” and the fighting in Falluja, where “a city of 250,000 had essentially been destroyed to ‘save’ it from the enemy. The information the administration put out about this quixotic victory was brazenly at odds with the known facts.” (ibid., 80-81, 123-124, 129, 161).

Rich also accused the administration of the “flogging of fear for political advantage,” arguing that “in election years, they really pulled out the stops. For the midterm of 2002, that meant hyping Saddam’s potential for unleashing a ‘mushroom cloud.’ For 2004, it was time for the terrorists who attacked America on 9/11 to make a comeback.” (ibid., 145). For example, he reported that when Attorney General John Ashcroft announced the names of seven wanted terrorists just before Memorial Day and asked for help finding them, it turned out the wanted men were not believed to be in the U.S. and six of them were “recycled from previous warnings” (ibid., 145-146).

Rich further accused the Bush administration of releasing fear-provoking information in order to distract the media from news that would be damaging. For example, he noted that on the day that damaging information about the administration’s response to Hurricane Katrina was released, the President attempted to capture the headlines by announcing that a plan to drive a plane into the U.S. Bank Tower in Los Angeles had been disrupted. This disrupted plot had actually been mentioned by federal officials two years previously and the administration did not share details with the mayor of Los Angeles prior to the President’s speech (ibid, 204). Rich concluded that “certainly this was a White House that was very comfortable with lying.” (ibid., 218). Reporters were intimidated by being branded as “unpatriotic” for questioning the war (ibid.,



161, 163).

Rich further documented how the Pentagon created the Office of Strategic Influence to “plant helpful ‘news,’ some of it phony, with foreign media.” (ibid., 32). He reported that similarly questionable tactics were used to influence domestic media coverage. For example, more than 50 news stations around the country ran news segments about the new Medicare prescription drug benefit that it turned out had been produced by the administration’s Department of Health and Human Services (ibid., 166). Likewise, the Department of Education paid Armstrong Williams to promote its No Child Left Behind initiative, and he subsequently both served as a media commentator and interviewed the Vice President in a segment passed off as a genuine news story (ibid., 167-168). Two newspaper columnists were paid by the Department of Health and Human Services for promoting marriage initiatives (ibid, 169). The Transportation Security Administration used a public affairs staffer with a fake name to act as a reporter in a segment about airport security (ibid., 169). “*The New York Times* found that, all told, at least twenty federal agencies had made and distributed hundreds of fake news segments over the past four years, landing them even in big markets, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.” (ibid., 169). Additionally, Bush political appointees at NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration were found to be rewriting and censoring documents and speeches in which scientific findings conflicted with the administration’s policies (ibid., 170).

One reporter inside the White House press corps was actually exposed to be using the false name of “Jeff Gannon.” “A close reading of the transcripts of televised White House press briefings over the preceding two years revealed that at uncannily crucial moments, ‘Jeff’ was called on by McClellan to field softballs and stanch tough questioning on such topics as Abu

Ghraib and [White House Senior Adviser Karl] Rove’s possible involvement in the outing of the CIA officer Valerie Plame Wilson.” (ibid., 171-172) Similarly, the audience at a press conference held by a deputy FEMA administrator in October 2007 was later exposed as FEMA’s own employees (Kosar 2012, 191).

More recently, President Obama has been accused of lying about his signature health care initiative, the Affordable Care Act, by falsely claiming that Americans who liked their health insurance policies would be able to keep them under the new law (Madhani 2013). Obama and his top aides have also been accused of lying regarding the details of the September 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, which left the U.S. Ambassador dead (Mears 2012).

Of course, charges of government distortion are not new. In *The Politics of Lying*, David Wise also accused the government of regularly lying during the Vietnam era. For example, he argued, the government lied about the circumstances surrounding the torpedo attack which caused President Johnson to order the first bombing of North Vietnam, and continued to lie throughout the war; the Secretary of Defense publicly and falsely denied an air attack on Hanoi and U.S. operations in My Lai, Vietnam – the site of a grotesque massacre – were presented to visitors as one of the military’s successful operations (ibid., 6, 10, 27-28, 181).

David L. Altheide and John M. Johnson have argued that distortions are in fact commonplace, even in seemingly more mundane and innocuous government information. They studied how data reported in official government reports was collected across a variety of government offices, finding that “many of these workers were oriented to such practical concerns as maintaining friendships, promoting individual careers, ‘covering their asses,’ getting back at real and potential enemies, and above all, maintaining appearances of competence and legitimacy for their superiors.” (1980, 36). As a result, they reported that they “have not discovered one case

in which knowledge of the broader context of information processing and awareness of the procedures used in collecting, categorizing, interpreting, and presenting data in reports has not significantly altered the meaning and confidence in those reports.” (ibid., 239).

A key tool that the government is accused of wielding to its advantage is the classification system. Wise argued that the government has sometimes released classified information to serve its aims or destroy political enemies and at other times classified data to protect incriminating evidence (1973, 28, 108-109, 118, 133). In fact, David Pozen has argued that the reason government leakers are almost never prosecuted is because doing so could end up “compromising the government’s instrumental use of the press.” (Coll 2013, 55). “With its control over information supported by an official system of secrecy and classification, the government has almost unlimited power to misinform the public,” according to Wise. “It does so for various reasons. The government lies to manipulate public opinion, to generate public support for its policies, and to silence its critics. Ultimately, it lies to stay in power.” (1973, 28) An additional institution which Wise has argued wrongly promotes government secrecy and possible manipulation is the use of executive privilege to prevent White House aides from testifying before Congress (ibid., 64).

In the eyes of critics, it is unequal resources such as these which make what they call government “propaganda” so fearsome. For example, former Senator Fulbright noted in his attack on the Defense Department’s public affairs apparatus, *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*, that the Department of Defense has billions of dollars at its disposal, which it utilizes to indoctrinate and impress audiences with skydiving paratroopers, bands, and trips around the country to build support for its programs (1970, 6, 44). Fulbright argued that the Department also capitalizes on the vested interests of workers and businesses tied to the military-industrial

complex who support their aims (ibid., 12-13). While Fulbright acknowledged that it is imperative for the government to release information, he charged that the government is also guilty of propaganda, which promulgates *ideas* – the namesake of the seventeenth-century *Congregatio de propaganda* which trained missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church (ibid., 18, 24-25). In particular, Fulbright said, the military stimulates patriotism, makes claims to be protecting the American way of life, glorifies militarism, and overplays its humanitarian work instead of the death and destruction it wreaks, through distorted, oversimplified, and one-dimensional communications designed to build support for staggering defense budgets (ibid., 45, 70, 71, 74 84). The disturbing result of this propaganda, Fulbright said, is that while war used to be abhorrent to the American people, they have come to view the military as comforting (ibid., 148-149). Yet, according to Fulbright, war presents a danger to the nation itself (Fulbright 1970, 155). Particularly rankling to these critics is that such propaganda is conducted with taxpayer money, such that “the citizenry pays to be propagandized” (Chomsky and Herman 1988, 22).

Critics also charge the government with using its power to strong-arm reporters into positive coverage. “There are ... small but effective ways for the White House to retaliate against reporters who do not ‘go along,’ according to Wise (1973, 242.) For example, as previously discussed, according to Leon Sigal, “senior officials employ a variety of tactics against reporters on the beat in order to confine newsgathering to routine channels. One is simply to keep them busy with a steady stream of information through these channels on the premise that the best way to keep the press from peering into dark corners is to shine a light elsewhere.” (1973, 54). Likewise, there “lies the implicit threat to restrict access. Reporters can be left off a press plane, denied a military accreditation card that would allow them on board military transport in a war zone, barred from a briefing, subjected to harassment and investigation, or simply never granted

an interview or a leak.” (ibid., 55).

Ultimately, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman have argued, the media feel that they must report doubtful information provided by government officials, “even if they tell whoppers,” and be cautious with their criticism, because they rely so heavily on government sources to do their work (1988, 22). As a result, they argued, the media end up serving the very privileged interests that Bernays sought to bolster a century ago, and failing to convey the information citizens need to exercise control over the political process (ibid., 298). While the rancor of reporters on cable news channels today may suggest that the media was far from timid, the facts remains that the U.S. only recently went to war on the basis of false claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq which it appears in retrospect the media had sufficient evidence to debunk beforehand. Wise argued that “the consent of the governed is basic to American democracy. If the governed are misled ... the system may go on – but not as a democracy.” (1973, 18).

### *To Promote Democracy?*

Public relations professionals and their defenders take a wholly different view of the profession. At their most generous, press offices are described as “an entitlement that flows from the nature of a free society and the relationship of the state to the citizen. What more natural function of government is there in a democracy than for it to make available information about how it is governing?” (Hess 1984, 115).

James McCamy argued that, without the information that government public affairs officers provide, “the sheer physical inability of the press to cover Washington’s many news sources would prevent reporters from fulfilling their role of vigilant protector of the public interest.” (1939, 249). Ernest A. Lotito, who served as Commerce Department Public Affairs Director, concurred, arguing that

if, we believe an informed citizenry is the foundation of democracy, then public affairs is one of the most critical functions of government. Without it, the job of ferreting out the massive amounts of information it makes available would be an impossible task for the media and the millions of business people and ordinary citizens that require it in their daily lives. Public affairs in government is to help tell the people the facts so they can make the enlightened decisions that ensure the survival and success of our democratic system. (1981, 288).

Practitioners describe a range of reasons why the information they provide is critical to the nation. First, information the government possesses – such as facts about harmful products and drugs – may be vital to public health and safety (Settel 1968, 43). It is also critical for the government to convey information about its own programs. Roy Swift, who served as Information Officer for the Social Security Administration (SSA), drew a distinction between a right to know and a need to know. “If the citizen *needs* to know something in order to secure his rights or to meet his obligations under the law, the SSA cannot wait for him to ask. The administration must actively seek him out and inform him.” (1968, 273). Former Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Wilbur J. Cohen, likewise noted that information about available programs has not always reached the poor, but “...explaining the government’s programs to the people who must pay for them is as essential in a democracy as developing the programs and carrying them out.” (1968, 19-20).

The government also depends upon the release of such information in order to function effectively. A. James Golato, who served as National Director of the Public Affairs Division of

the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), for example, noted that since the U.S. tax system depends upon voluntary compliance, it is critical for the agency to reach citizens both to educate them about tax laws and to convince them that the law is being applied properly, since “voluntary compliance depends to a large extent on the public’s perception and confidence that the tax law is being administered uniformly and fairly.” (1981, 82). Public support for specific policies is also often critical to their success. Andrew Berding, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, noted that “virtually every major foreign policy needs the physical and financial as well as the moral backing of the American people.” If the government does not convey its policies well, “other countries and our own citizens give only partial acceptance to an idea that should have been warmly welcomed.” (1968, 111, 122). In instances such as these, Rourke noted that “the public interest can easily suffer more from the weakness than it does from the strength of government publicity.” (1961, 15).

Additionally, the government must often spur citizens to action in order to solve problems cheaper or more effectively. Lee has noted, for example, that government public relations campaigns about the importance of seat belt use have saved lives and are cheaper than hiring increased law enforcement to issue violations; campaigns about the importance of hand washing are cheaper than the cost of medical personnel to handle flu outbreaks; and Post Office campaigns to alert consumers to increased rates are less expensive than returning mail containing insufficient postage. “Government agencies can encourage citizens to serve as their eyes and ears, thus reducing the need for staffing. For example, when a person chooses to call 911 in an emergency, he or she has been co-opted effectively by the police and fire departments to serve as a member of its informal organization.” (2012, 21-22).

Likewise, William Ruder, who served as Commerce Department Assistant Secretary for

Public Affairs, argued that “the problems of environmental pollution, of urban decay, of mass transit, of unequal employment opportunity ... are not susceptible to solution by the spending of money alone. There must be a public commitment to their solution. ... The government ... must learn to engage itself into the dynamics of the community so that the community will have the will to solve these problems and make the necessary commitments.” (1968, 81). Finally, the government may need to communicate in order to recruit staff (Posner 1968, 289).

Public affairs professionals are needed not just to release information, but to be sure that the government does so responsibly. Michael Amrine, who served as Public Information Officer for the American Psychological Association, noted the importance of understanding people’s fears and how they will be unleashed by information – a responsibility that clearly carries over to government public affairs as well. Amrine noted that policies were carefully crafted for the release of information about progress on cancer cures, to take account of the reactions of individuals with terminal cancer and their families (Amrine 1968, 213-214). It is likewise critical for the Treasury public information officers in this study to account for possible global market reactions to their announcements.

Public affairs officers are also responsible for ensuring that information is presented clearly; as Pimlott argued, “to publish information which the members of the general public cannot understand is certainly to “diffuse” information, but it is not to inform those who receive it.” (1951, 80). Furthermore, as Bernard Posner, who served as Deputy Executive Secretary of the President’s Committee on Employment of the Handicapped, has argued, public affairs professionals should be “alert for all sorts of clues to current attitude patterns” so that they can channel feedback from the public back into the government (1968, 290).

Thus, as Lee has concluded, “public relations can help an agency implement its goals



better, faster, cheaper.” (2012, 18).

The tools and techniques of public relations help reach potential customers and clients, notify the public of new laws and programs, promote the goals of the agency through public service campaigns that encourage (or discourage) certain behaviors, or increase public cooperation with the agency, such as through tip lines and websites. In all these examples, public relations is an inexpensive substitute for hiring more staff, increasing agency enforcement and regulation activities, or expanding field offices. (ibid., 19).

Some public affairs officials have noted the irony of the fact that, when they do their jobs particularly well, their outputs are viewed as sinister. “As long as the government produces publications which end up by the thousands in basement warehouses, read by no one, not even officials of the sponsoring agency, then no one seems to mind,” Cohen noted. “But as soon as the government publishes or produces an information product that is good enough to command attention, someone yells competition!” (1968, 21). “If the government information officer wants to catch the busy American’s attention, he *must* turn out a professional product that is as attractive, exciting, and compelling as all the other communication products on the market.” (ibid., 21).

The perspective of practitioners also provides a more nuanced view into situations in which others have accused the government of dissembling. Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs William Goulding explained such situations this way: “I misled and misinformed the American people a good many times in a good many ways – through my own lack of foresight, carelessness, through relaying incomplete information which the originators

considered complete, through transmitting reports which had been falsified deliberately at lower levels,” he said. “But I never intentionally deceived the people.” (1970, 15). Goulding outlined a number of less diabolical reasons why the government sometimes misinforms the people.

First, Goulding said, first reports from the field on complicated events are very often wrong, yet there is pressure from reporters to release information rapidly (*ibid.*, 19). Matters are made more complicated by the challenges of information-gathering within large agencies – the staff of the Department of Defense (DoD) was larger than the population of some countries (*ibid.*, 118). Additionally, Goulding sometimes misinformed the people when lower-level Defense officials misrepresented their own misconduct (*ibid.*, 147, 151). “Every nine-year-old televiewer knows that the ten conscientious persons in the bank at the time of the holdup will give ten sworn statements which are dramatically different as to the ‘facts’ of the robbery,” Goulding argued. “Sergeants, lieutenant commanders, brigadier generals and vice admirals are no more perfect.” (*ibid.*, 117). As a result, “too often, in any administration, DoD is charged unfairly with deceit or cover-up when it is guilty only of great size and of the human error and human delay that are part of great size.” (*ibid.*, 119). At other times, Goulding said, he was accused of withholding information when foreign nations whom the United States was dependent upon for cooperation would not allow him to share information on activities happening within their countries (*ibid.*, 51, 125).

In fact, Goulding and other practitioners have insisted that public affairs officials are the first to demand the release of damaging information about the government. “Top-level admirals in the Navy, concerned that a mistake will be misinterpreted, are reluctant to acknowledge that a search-and-rescue ship misunderstood a message and steamed in the wrong direction for four hours, but the information officer knows the story will surface eventually and wants to get it out,

on the record, before the people, on the Navy's terms instead of as an acknowledgement beaten out of the government by the press," he said. "The experienced information officer knows the press. He knows that extreme statements or phony ones will not hold up; that, for example, the effort to hide a foolish attempt by a foolish Army commander to solicit free whiskey from merchants for a base party will fail. A good information officer always will attempt to tell his commander to face up to the errors publicly and get them behind him." (ibid., 46). Grossman and Kumar concurred that "since presidents and leading advisers often believe that it is best to tell the public less than everything, a press secretary often has to convince them that they would be best served by 'going the hangout route' (a Watergate expression meaning that it is better to give out bad news yourself because it will look worse if it appears to have been concealed)." (1981, 150). Similarly, in his interviews of reporters and public affairs officers, Nimmo found that "both sets of political communicators agreed that withholding of information from the public view is an evil." (1964, 180).

Other public affairs officials overwhelmingly at least claim that they release negative information in the belief that it is counterproductive to attempt to withhold or dissemble because the press will eventually find out – and such efforts will have therefore only served to exacerbate their problems (Brown 1976, 34; Cutlip 1976, 6; Goulding 1970, 46; Krohn 2004, 36; McClellan 2008, 51). Roy Hoopes, who served as Consultant to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's Office of Public Information advised, "above all, no information officer should try to persuade a writer that everything is perfect. If mistakes have been made, the agency should admit them. If the author is a good reporter, he is going to find them sooner or later anyway." (1968, 333-334). In a 1979 study of members of the National Association of Government Communicators, ninety-two percent said they would provide information to the public even if it

were “embarrassing,” though of course it is easier to make such claims in the abstract. (Rabin 1981, 109). Likewise, in their study of White House communications, Grossman and Kumar concluded that “there are few people who work as White House aides in the area of political communications who do not understand that . . . reporters should get answers to their questions, and that honesty is the best policy – or at least that outright lying is usually disastrous.” (1981, 306).

A further check on the government is the presence of individuals and organizations with competing agendas who have incentives to correct the record if the government dissembles. In one of the first studies of government public affairs officers in 1939, McCamy noted that “the publicists of other interests and opposition parties can be on the job to keep government publicists from dominating the field.”(19). Similarly, Pimlott’s 1951 study of government public relations found that “releases are prepared in the knowledge that they will be exposed to the expert scrutiny of other newspapermen and of watchful Congressmen.” (148). As a result, he found, “the very suspicion that the truth may not be told sets a premium upon scrupulous accuracy about verifiable facts, and on many matters the public receives fuller and more reliable information than would otherwise have been the case.” (ibid., 213). Rourke also noted that the media industry has strong incentives to ensure that the government is not able to conceal information, because “the press itself makes a living off the news.” (1961, 217). He argued: “The brashness of American newspapermen in ferreting out information is legendary, and this, coupled with the hound-dog inquisitiveness of Congress, makes it impossible to keep very many things secret in American government today merely because they are embarrassing.” (ibid., 188).

The media’s suspicion of government is a deeply imbued value. Rourke has noted that

in accordance with the ‘muckracking’ tradition of American politics, the reporter in this country ordinarily conceives of his or her appropriate role as that of exposing the misdeeds of public officials ... representatives of the media as a group commonly cultivate an attitude of cynical disbelief toward statements and activities at ‘city hall’ – a term embracing executive agencies at all levels of government. This attitude creates a built-in ‘credibility gap’ of substantial dimensions between media personnel and government officials, and strongly reinforces the independence of reporters. (1984, 172).

Lee concurred that “the negative view of government in American journalism is as old as America itself. The American revolutionary war was justified as a reaction to tyranny.” He noted that “therefore, the ethos of American journalism was that its *raison d’etre* was to cover government critically.” (2008, 88). As Morgan has also reminded us, the media in the United States enjoy more freedom than the press in virtually any other nation (1986, 147). Rourke also noted that government agencies are required by law to release much information; “failure to do so might bring them under legal or political attack for concealing information from the public.” (1961, 191).

Lee has argued that media coverage of government agencies focuses so heavily on covering stories with familiar archetypes, such as the “money-wasting bureaucrat” and “the victim of bureaucracy,” that government public affairs officers have had no choice but to strike back with sophisticated counter-strategies. (1999, 459). Joseph P. Viteritti has likewise argued that the press “has a serious point of view that often borders on bias, and it frequently loses its balance on the precarious wire-thin line between reporting and editorializing. ... If managing the press is a form of manipulation, it is also a survival skill that assists the public administrator in

transmitting information without distortion.” (2008, 328).

Furthermore, the skepticism of the American people themselves may be seen as a further democratic check on the ability of government public relations efforts to dupe them. As Altheide and Johnson have argued, “in the United States, as well as other modern societies, the search for the self-serving and self-interested character of official records is always part of the scrutiny and doubt with which these populations greet governmental and corporate organizations ... the American public is hardly a ‘pushover’ for official rhetoric or records.” (1980, xiii).

Additionally, the checking of official statements from other parts of the government springs from America’s Constitutional system of divided, competing branches. As Rourke memorably noted, “in the pluralist environment that is the essence of democracy, government never monopolizes all the instruments of persuasion, and under the American system of separation of powers, it is even possible to find the opposition entrenched within the structure of government itself.” (1961, 203). “The existence of competing centers of power within society serves to guarantee that official pronouncements will not go uncontested, if there is any question of their accuracy on matters of fact or interpretation, and it insures that efforts to conceal information will be subject to frequent challenge.” (ibid., 216). He noted that a further check is “the vigorous competition within the cadres of bureaucracy - ... which spills over and manifests itself in the form of public exposure by one agency of suppression or distortion of information in which another agency is alleged to be engaged.” (ibid., 221).

Leon Sigal likewise argued that it is America’s constitutional structure that results in the release of more information in the United States than in Britain (1973, 131). As Carlton Spitzer, who served as Director of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare’s Office of Public Information, put it:

government public information officers can be as guilty of propagandizing narrow causes and clouding issues as any huckster on New York's Seventh Avenue, and usually with far more serious consequences. But only the foolish or misguided would participate in such schemes because they are doomed to failure. The whole system of government in America is open and fragmented. Employees in various agencies are not necessarily on the same side of all issues, although they may occupy the same offices. Leaking information is common practice. Public information workers cannot act merely as creatures of the Congress or spokesmen for the current administration. Their moves and statements are scrutinized and challenged by a skeptical press and critical private-interest associations of every kind." (1968, 53-54).

Another reason for this strategy of preemptive release is that if information were withheld, when the truth eventually did surface, the government would lose all credibility – with the American people and with the press. Goulding, for example, wrote that he regretted that the government did not preemptively explain to the American people the inevitable death and destruction the war in Vietnam would wreak on local peoples. When the *New York Times* covered the deaths of civilians and destruction of homes, Americans were shocked – contributing to distrust of the U.S. government and lessening support for the war (1970, 89). Spitzer noted that “Americans respond with strength and determination to discouraging news if the news is honestly presented and a course of action is outlined. But the American people, like good editors, rarely if ever forgive a lie” – although eventually their memories may fade (1968, 63). Hiebert cited social science research indicating that humans are most susceptible to persuasion when they

hear events for the first time as further ammunition for why upfront disclosure makes strategic sense. (Hiebert 1981, 10).

Numerous public affairs officials also report that misinforming the press for whatever reason cripples one's reputation and ability to do their job (Goulding 1970, 23). President George W. Bush's Press Secretary, Ari Fleischer, explained that "the job of the White House press secretary isn't to say everything you know to be true, but everything you say had better be true." (2005, 246). President George W. Bush's next Press Secretary, Scott McClellan, resigned after two top administration officials – Senior Adviser Karl Rove and Chief of Staff to the Vice President "Scooter" Libby – both gave him personal assurances they were not involved in the leak of the identity of C.I.A. officer Valerie Plame, which later turned out to be false (McClellan 2008, 219, 260). McClellan reported that "unknowingly passing along a falsehood ... would ultimately prove fatal to my ability to serve the president effectively." (ibid., 3). Grossman and Kumar likewise found that "when reporters, editors, and others concerned with covering the President do not trust them, press secretaries lose their usefulness to news organizations and thus to the President as well." (1981, 131). "Thus public information officers and their peers must hold to the truth and remain faithful to the facts of any issue in order to survive." (Spitzer 1968, 54). Yet the ability to maintain the trust and confidence of the press is at least partly a personal skill; Grossman and Kumar, for example, noted that while President Nixon's Press Secretary, Ronald Ziegler, was unable to maintain the trust of the White House press corps, when his deputy, Gerald Warren, began replacing him at briefings, the reporters believed Warren even though he conveyed the exact same information (1981, 155).

Rourke indicated that one of the reasons why "administrative officials are quite defensive about withholding information and are reluctant to persist in practices of secrecy when these



practices are exposed to public view or come under congressional criticism” is because “the political beliefs of administrators have been framed in the same ideological tradition as those of Congressmen and newspaper editors.” (1961, 109-110). The academic training of many government public affairs officials in journalism may also impart values that cause them to eschew conveying “mistruths.” In a recent survey by the Society of Professional Journalists and National Association of Government Communicators of 154 members of the Association – eighty-nine percent of whom worked as public affairs officers – fifty-two percent of the officials reported that they had previously worked as a journalist and 47.3 percent reported that their principal area of study in their education was journalism (Carlson and Jackson 2013, 12-13).

Another indication of the limited capability of public affairs officials to manipulate information is the argument of former White House Press Secretary, George Reedy, that what presidents consider to be problems with media coverage more often reflect problems in the real world that the White House is powerless to present as otherwise. “Unfortunately for the mental peace of presidents, events cannot be altered significantly by control over the printed word ... While the White House does have at its command instrumentalities for manipulating the press, they are effective only in regard to adjectives, not to the hard, substantive news that is the ultimate shaper of public opinion.” (1970, 107). Reedy reported that “it is only in George Orwell’s world that war can be labeled peace.” (ibid., 106).

Goulding allowed that the government sometimes conceals information to protect national security. “In determining what information is to be made public, the government must and does take into account the effect the release of that information will have on sovereign states which are friendly to us, allied with us, neutral about us, potentially hostile or outright enemies.” (1970, 20). He also argued that it is sometimes proper for the government to give false

information to protect intelligence operations. “It is too bad that we need to engage in illegal intelligence activity in this imperfect world, but it is necessary for our liberty that we do so.” (ibid., 126).

At other times, government officials may be accused of secrecy when it would be premature and counterproductive to discuss policies because they are still in development. For example, when *New York Times* correspondent James Reston met with Secretary of State Dean Acheson on the Secretary’s last day in office, Acheson is said to have told Reston that it would have been impossible for them to have had a better relationship. “A Secretary of State, Acheson said, has to germinate new policies and to nurse them along until they have reached the stage of development when they can withstand the battering assaults of the political arena. The reporter’s primary purpose, on the other hand, is to get news for his paper no matter what the effect on policy.” (Cater 1959, 20).

Beyond and sometimes despite these circumstances, however, these authors say that public affairs officials advocate within their governments for the release of information. After spending a year observing the press offices of the White House, Pentagon, Department of State, Department of Transportation, and Federal Drug Administration, Stephen Hess concluded that “if they were invited to view press operations from the inside, many reporters would be surprised to see the extent to which the press officer is their advocate within the permanent government.” (1984, 35).

It should also be noted that, under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), it is illegal for the government to withhold information from the public. The Act contains nine exemptions allowing the government to withhold information related to national security; trade practices; personnel practices; certain inter- and intra-agency messages; information exempted from

disclosure by statute; and certain personnel, medical, law enforcement, and financial regulatory records. In one of his first official acts, President Obama issued a memorandum to the heads of executive departments and agencies, directing them to “adopt a presumption in favor of disclosure” in responding to FOIA queries, quoting the maxim of former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis that “sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.” (Obama 2009). Of course, the administration has been accused of improperly withholding national security information, particularly in the wake of the leaks by former CIA staffer Edward Snowden; veteran CBS News anchor Bob Schieffer recently described the Obama administration as “the most manipulative and secretive administration I’ve covered.” (Downie 2013).

However, while a significant amount of government information is withheld and cannot be corroborated (particularly regarding national security), the presumption of disclosure and substantial amount of information that *is* disclosed annually can only promote the comportment of government claims with reality, since public affairs officers know that reporters can utilize the law to obtain documents to corroborate their accounts. Reporters can (and do) even file FOIA requests for the correspondence of public affairs officials about their inquiries.

For similar reasons, these authors claim that the government is not guilty of engaging in propaganda. Goulding reported that

‘propaganda’ is another color word which to me suggests sugar-coating information so that the public swallows it, or deliberately repeating a false concept so often that the public accepts it. I have seen no Assistant Secretary of Defense engage in propaganda of this description, either in my four years in government or in fifteen years as a Washington newspaperman, and I know of no evidence supporting any charge of this nature. (1970,

165).

As for Fulbright's charges that the Department of Defense promotes militarism, Goulding claimed the very reverse to be true; he said he coordinated funding requests and regularly forced various parts of the Pentagon to limit them (ibid., 160, 162).

Part of the reason that government public affairs officials eschew propagandizing may be that if the government tried to "spin" facts too obviously, they would be criticized for so doing (Helms 2012, 661). But Goulding claimed that when he worked in the government, there simply was no organized apparatus for going beyond the release of information actually to attempt to explain policy to the American people (1970, 81).

The claim is consistent with Hess' fieldwork. Hess reported that "the most frequent and serious charge against press offices- that they manage, manipulate, or control the news – I found inaccurate for an almost perverse reason: they are simply not skillful enough or large enough to manipulate the news." (1984, 108). "The view from inside a press office is that most energy seems to be devoted to trying to find out what the rest of the agency is doing (often unsuccessfully), gathering material that has been requested by reporters rather than promoting carefully prepared positions, and distributing information that is neither controversial nor especially self-serving." (ibid., 108).

Hess found that public affairs officers engage in four key activities: "informing themselves and their colleagues, preparing material for the news media, staging events, and responding to reporters' inquiries." (ibid., 38). He noted that the amount of time that such officials spend being proactive – as opposed to reacting to reporters – is an useful gauge of the opportunity for manipulation. This distinction will be useful for me in this study of public affairs

officials. Hess, for example, found “that press offices spend as much time responding to reporters’ inquiries as they do on all other activities combined. Given that a substantial number of hours are devoted to keeping themselves informed and to pursuing internal agency business, not more than a quarter of their time is left for staging events and preparing material for the news media.” (ibid., 53).

In the end, Hess concluded that “most of their activities behind closed doors as well as in briefing rooms are merely variations of shouting good news and whispering bad news.” (ibid., 111). In other words, government public affairs officers try to convey the best possible impressions of their agencies. It is unclear that this is different from normal human behavior. Erving Goffman’s seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, for example, depicted all people as active managers of the impressions they give to others in social situations (1959, 4). In this sense, public affairs officers are singled out and criticized for doing what normal people do virtually every waking moment of their lives!

Furthermore, in his interviews, Nimmo found that reporters believed that government publicity was both necessary and positive, since it is only through the leadership of public opinion that federal officials are able to build the support they need in order to govern (1964, 184-185). He reported that “given a choice between the danger of being used by political officials for partisan purposes and being spared such danger by being shut out of policy matters, reporters consistently prefer the hazards of being manipulated.” (ibid., 199).

While Hess found that such officials do not blatantly lie or propagandize, they do, however, often tell what he calls “half-truths” by defining questions narrowly (1984, 25). “Press officers hedge, they insinuate, but I always felt they thought they were playing by rules that reporters understood.” (ibid., 112). Furthermore, he noted, “it is by unraveling the half-truths

that reporters display their professional skill; consequently, they too have a vested interest in maintaining this system despite whatever personal beliefs they have about government's obligation to tell the truth." (ibid., 25).

Of course, nearly all truths are partial in the first place, given the vast array of possible details that could possibly be utilized to describe any particular situation, as well as the influence that the describer's personal values and perspective has on how they interpret events and determine what they believe to be most important and relevant. Nevertheless, public information officers clearly have an incentive and opportunity to place their facts in the best possible light, and it is undeniable that it would generally be better for citizens if they were more eager to share their bad news. However, it is not at all obvious that any other system would or could be better – especially in light of our basic human nature that Goffman has explored.

Stanley Kelley, Jr., for example, has studied the system that existed before government public affairs officers. National leaders could not obtain party consensus or authority because voters were reached through fragmented local party bosses. "The importance of the boss's role in political maneuverings ... encouraged a de-emphasis on issues in American party conflict. ... the boss's appeal to the voter was not primarily on issues and particularly not on national ones. His entire effort was rather to tie himself, through patronage and favor, a bloc of votes on which he could rely regardless of policy debates and regardless of candidates." What was neglected was building "the ability of men to understand the issues of policy, to discuss, and to govern for themselves – these are articles of faith that lie at the center of democratic thought." (1966, 217). Thus, while Kelley allowed that the possibility for distortion and oversimplification by government public affairs officers is present, and while allegations regarding the permanent campaign make clear that, today, issues are certainly not always debated in the level of detail

they perhaps call for, “what one is criticizing cannot be contrasted with a past age in American politics when public issues were sincerely presented and soundly argued.” (ibid., 218).

Yet the limited and now very dated literature available to us on public affairs officers in government agencies makes it particularly important to bring these studies up to date with evidence from the modern, new media era.

### **Conclusion**

Which side is right? Are government officials on a “permanent campaign” to build support for the president, distorting and withholding the information they provide to the media in the process? Or are they servants of the people, providing the information citizens need to judge and participate fully in our democracy? These accounts make clear that, like other humans and comic book action heroes, government public affairs officers have the capacity to use their power for good or for sinister purposes. However, as previously discussed, government public affairs officers have been mostly neglected in a literature that has focused on the White House, and the important account of Stephen Hess is now three decades old. This study will therefore shed light on this question and bring the literature up to date by questioning modern government public affairs officers about their practices, in order to gain greater clarity on their tactics, techniques, and views of their roles.

### **Chapter 3: Theories and Research Design**

I have already demonstrated the importance of these questions (in the Introduction) and reviewed how the extant literature raises more questions than it answers (Chapters 1 and 2). In this chapter, I build upon the previously-reviewed literature to develop my own theories and research design regarding the two central issues of this study: (1) whether political appointees or civil servants better serve the interests of presidents of the United States in key positions; and (2) whether political appointees in government agencies are conducting a permanent campaign.

My theories are informed by logical extensions of the academic literature, as well as by observations from my own experience serving as Spokesperson for International Affairs in the Treasury Department, as a political appointee in President Obama's administration from 2011-2012.

#### **Theories To Be Tested**

##### *Civil Servants vs. Political Appointees*

This study is designed to test two theories. First, I argue that efforts by modern presidents to improve their efficacy by hiring more political appointees have been counterproductive. I expect that, in positions critical to the president's agenda and political fortunes, civil servants will be found to be more effective and no less loyal to the president than political appointees.

I define effectiveness as success in advancing the administration's goals. In my study, I consider an effective public affairs officer to be one who is able to shape the tone, volume, and content of media coverage in order to reflect positively on the administration he or she serves and advance the administration's policy arguments. I define loyalty as the pursuit of the president's goals – even when they conflict with an official's own personal goals. This study



investigates the practice of disloyalty, using the prevalence of leaking unauthorized information to the press as a measure. I define leaks as information given without attribution to reporters which does not further the interests of the administration and would not be approved by an official's supervisors – in contrast to plants, which I define as information given to reporters without attribution which *does* further the interests of the administration and would be approved by the official's supervisors.

As discussed in chapter 1, a variety of evidence indicates that civil servants perform better on the job than political appointees (Hecl 1977; Lewis 2008). Yet, as we have seen, American presidents continue to use political appointees in unprecedented numbers globally. George C. Edwards III has questioned whether presidents accept the lower competence of political appointees because they believe that appointees offer greater loyalty (2001, 81). However, this would only make sense if civil servants were less loyal to the president – a proposition that I argue is false.

In my study of Treasury public affairs officers, I expect to find that the relative effectiveness of political appointees with the press is diminished by several factors.

First, I expect civil servants to be more effective because political appointees tend to have bigger portfolios and operate in more of a pressure-cooker environment, which likely leaves them lacking the capacity to engage in the proactive practices of good communications professionals – such as crafting strategies in advance, pitching stories (rather than focusing solely on responding to inquiries from reporters), and coordinating with counterparts across the government. (Of course, civil service rules generally limit the number of hours that careerists can work, but even if careerists were assigned bigger portfolios, I suspect that they would still retain an advantage over appointees because their greater policy knowledge, which will be discussed

below, would allow them to respond to reporters more rapidly.)

Second, I expect that political appointees spend a greater percentage of their time focused on the images of the officials for whom they work than their career counterparts; while a positive image of the president's Treasury team is ultimately beneficial to an administration, in my estimation the president benefits more from positive coverage of his policies and achievements.

Third, the shorter tenure of political appointees likely gives them less knowledge of the issues they are responsible for communicating in the press and weaker relationships with the reporters who cover their agencies. After spending a year observing the public affairs offices of the White House and several government agencies, Stephen Hess reported that "government public information practitioners ... frequently lack the fundamental awareness and understanding of a given situation to either provide public affairs counsel to decision-makers or even respond adequately to media queries regarding public policy, particularly during crisis." (1984, 228). Yet one of the most critical qualities of a successful spokesperson is being well-informed (Grossman and Kumar 1981, 149). In Morgan's survey, he found that the biggest complaint reporters had about public information officers was their lack of technical knowledge (1986, 74).

Other scholars have further warned that overreliance on appointees crowds out the knowledge and input of civil servants, who typically amass decades of experience in the minutiae of their policy portfolios, equipping them to offer critical advice to appointees. As Hugh Heclo has argued, "the independence entailed in neutral competence does not exist for its own sake; it exists precisely in order to serve the aims of elected partisan leadership." (1975, 81). Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman put it more bluntly: "one of the major functions ... of the permanent apparatus is to serve presidents by helping them avoid stupid mistakes that threaten their political viability." (1999, 171). Yet when the government becomes too top-heavy with

appointees, decisions lack this central input.

As a result of this tenure-based expertise, David Cohen has argued that civil servants are actually well-placed to advise appointees on *political* matters, because they are accustomed to working in an environment which requires taking account of the objectives of Congress, interest groups and other parties. Ironically, Cohen reported, “inexperienced political appointees often have far less sound *political* judgment.” (1996, 10). This claim is seemingly born out by Andrew Rudalevige’s study of legislation proposed by presidents between 1949-1996. He found that bills written in departments and agencies (which, by implication, involved greater input from civil servants) had a fifteen percent higher likelihood of passing in Congress than legislation drafted in the White House (2002, 156). Of course, it is possible that bills drafted in agencies were more technical or less polemical, making it easier for them to gain support. However, the possibility that civil servants could more effectively advance an administration’s agenda is a fascinating proposition worthy of further investigation.

Ronald Johnson and Gary Libecap have further discussed the ways in which the civil service system serves the interests of the *president* by promoting government efficacy. They have noted that the civil service was extended by presidents McKinley and Cleveland, specifically to meet the needs of the executive (1994, 13, 72-73). While the fully patronage-based system that previously existed generated inefficiency, fraud, and scandals, the civil service system allows presidents to meet the demands of their constituents for the more efficient delivery of government services by improving the quality of the government workforce (*ibid.*, 14, 20, 24). Furthermore, the use of civil servants allows presidents to avoid becoming completely besieged by jobseekers, as they were under the solely patronage-based system – resulting in significant time savings for the executive (*ibid.*, 56-57). Johnson and Libecap observed that the same

incentives remain for presidents today (*ibid.*, 171) – although, ironically, as a result of politicization, modern presidents today also have more aides to handle personnel matters.

Furthermore, I expect to find that, very often, the president does not necessarily need appointees in some of the positions they currently fill because their duties are not very political. Since the 1970s, Congress has significantly increased its oversight of federal agencies (Aberbach 1991). The Treasury and other agencies are therefore obliged by law to operate in certain highly specific ways. Therefore, staffers enjoy little discretion on many tasks – such as, for example, the release of congressionally-mandated economic indicators.

However, I expect the greater overall efficacy of civil servants to be somewhat diminished by efficacy advantages which the appointees possess. I expect that, relative to their careerist counterparts, appointees have better access to information, work on more high profile issues, and their superiors make more time for them because they place greater importance on the press. This would give appointees better, faster access to information in order to make their cases to reporters and would allow appointees to offer more interviews to reporters with senior administration officials in order to shape media coverage.

In my study of the loyalty of government officials, I expect to find that appointees are no more loyal to the president than civil servants. I suspect that this is partly due to the different selection processes for civil servants and political appointees, which influence their propensity to leak information to the press. While civil servants only advance in their careers if they follow strict protocols, political appointees are rewarded for more independent and riskier behavior. Political appointees also operate in a more political and high-profile environment in which there are greater advantages to be obtained from the outcomes of leaks – such as weakening rivals or doing favors for members of the press who will consider the value of their relationship when

judging them in future stories. Furthermore, unlike civil servants, political appointees do not enjoy tenure – incentivizing them to focus more heavily on bolstering their future career prospects through strategies such as fostering relationships with reporters. I therefore expect that, contrary to claims that civil servants will not be loyal to the president, this study will find that it is *political appointees* who are more likely to leak information to reporters that does not serve the president’s agenda.

This unconventional expectation is actually supported in the literature. As David Pozen has noted, “journalists, researchers, and government insiders have consistently attested that leaking is far more common among those in leadership positions.” (2013, 12). For example, legendary *New York Times* correspondent and editor James Reston concluded that “government is the only known vessel that leaks from the top.” (1967, 66). James Pfiffner likewise argued that “incidents like ... leaks to the press will surface in any administration, but as likely as not they will be instigated by the president’s own political appointees.” (1996, 85). “Perhaps the greatest frustration for presidents,” Hess suggested, “is when they are forced to realize that most executive branch leakers are their own people - political appointees - rather than the faceless bureaucrats they campaigned against.” (1984, 76). In his memoir, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates likewise described President Obama as being infuriated over leaks, explaining that while his agency was often accused of being the source of such leaks, “the president would acknowledge to me he had problems with leaks in his own shop.” (2014, 358).

However, in studies of the loyalty of civil servants, leaks have never before been utilized as a measure. Rather, as I will later discuss, myriad previous studies have attempted to measure civil service loyalty by testing whether agency outputs conform with presidential goals. Furthermore, what we know about leaks is largely anecdotal. My study attempts to address these

gaps.

I further expect that civil servants will be unlikely to engage in politically-motivated acts of disloyalty to an administration because the civil servants will not have particularly partisan views in the first place. I suspect that individuals with strong political views would choose a different, less constraining, line of work. The explosion of ideological think tanks and interest groups over the past several decades has created a plethora of job opportunities for policy professionals who are also politically ideological.

In addition, I hypothesize that the perceived greater loyalty of appointees to the president actually works to the president's disadvantage. I suspect that because appointees are viewed as political, reporters may be more skeptical of their claims. For example, in his study of government public affairs officers, David Morgan noted that "there exist a number of media relations advisers brought in by political appointees. Such people are themselves typically responsible only for selling their bosses, not the agency or department. Reporters certainly see such 'boss flacks' that way and treat them accordingly." (1986, xi). Likewise, Judy VanSlyke Turk's study of six state government agencies in Louisiana found that public affairs officers "who view their role as providers of persuasive 'propaganda' that serves the interests of their agencies are less successful in obtaining newspaper acceptance and use of their news releases and other 'handouts' than are public information representatives who view themselves merely as providers of information regardless of whether that information is persuasive." (1986, 7). (Of course, these studies are now significantly dated – evincing the need for more recent research on this subject.)

Therefore, while I expect that civil servants will be found to be both more competent and no less loyal than political appointees, I argue that the perceived greater loyalty of appointees to

the president actually works to the disadvantage of the chief executive, by hampering the effectiveness of his appointee advocates.

### *The Permanent Campaign*

The workloads of political appointees are well-documented to be massive (Bonafede 1987). I therefore suspect that their large volume of responsibilities will be found to preclude them from engaging in the more sophisticated techniques of the permanent campaign – providing a rather extraordinary mechanism of democratic protection. As a result, I expect to find little difference between political appointees and civil servants in the degree to which they are engaged in the permanent campaign tactics of utilizing public opinion polls to govern, playing to the emotions of the American people, and withholding and distorting information. I suspect that the activities of both groups are limited to more traditional tasks, such as releasing factual data and information about agency activities to the press and attempting to place such information in the best possible light and in congruence with the goals of the administration – not engaging in a permanent campaign. Furthermore, I suspect that the values of the journalism profession, such as faithfulness to facts, will cause public affairs officers to be willing to present facts and ideas in the most convincing and beneficial manner to the administration possible, but unwilling to distort or withhold information. In a 2013 survey by the Society of Professional Journalists and National Association of Government Communicators of 154 members of the Association (eighty-nine percent of whom worked as public affairs officers), fifty-two percent of the officials reported that they had previously worked as a journalist and 47.3 percent reported that their principal area of study in their education was journalism (Carlson and Jackson 2013, 12-13). And in one of the few previous studies ever to conduct interviews with public affairs officials in government

agencies, Dan Nimmo reported that the officials told him that “withholding of information from the public view is an evil.” (1964, 180). Of course, the evidence considered in chapter 2 makes clear that government spokespeople have certainly withheld and distorted information. However, I suspect that those who study journalism may be somewhat less willing to do so, as a result of the values imbued during the course of their educations.

I expect that the public affairs officers will report that attempts to convey mistruths would be counterproductive. As discussed in chapter 2, in America’s system of divided government and media scrutiny, attempts to cover up information are unlikely to be successful for very long, since *someone* will have an incentive to leak whatever facts are being withheld or distorted. (Of course, it is difficult to identify information that is withheld and not exposed by other actors – another reason why this research is so important, because I will ask public affairs officers how often they withhold information).

I therefore theorize that, in my interviews, civil servants will be found to be more competent and no less loyal than political appointees – and neither group will be found to be engaging in the tactics of the permanent campaign.

### **Research Design**

In this section, I discuss how these arguments will be tested in my case study. First, I discuss the selection of public affairs officers, and Treasury officials specifically, as representatives of the “career” and “appointee” categories in my theory. Next, I discuss the qualitative data collection process (interviews) utilized in this study and how I will operationalize the conceptual variables in my theory.



## Case Study Selection

Public affairs officers were selected for this study because of their outsize importance to the president. The most potent weapon in the arsenal of modern presidents is widely believed to be their power to communicate – making the jobs of officials who communicate on behalf of the president particularly important.

Richard Neustadt revolutionized scholarship about the presidency when, borrowing the words of President Truman, he claimed that “presidential power is the power to persuade.” (1991, 10). Neustadt argued that since America’s leaders share authority but do not have influence over whether other officials hold their jobs, the only way for the president to convince other politicians to do what he wishes is to persuade them that doing so is in their own interests (ibid., 29-30). Presidents may increase their power by burnishing their reputations and public support, since other Washingtonians take account of the level of public support the president enjoys in assessing the consequences they will face for disagreeing with him. (ibid., 55, 73). Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr. likewise influentially argued that “it has been the relationship between President and public that has given this office its power and importance.” (1969, 3). Lacking any formal constitutional authority to dictate the law beyond the veto, “the leverage the President has acquired in the law-making process has been indirect, based on use of the arts of persuasion, and ultimately grounded in the popular support he can claim or mobilize.” (ibid., 4).

Of course, Edwards takes issue with this theory because he finds that presidents (including the “giants” such as Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Reagan, have largely been unsuccessful in their attempts to persuade other actors (2009, 21). Edwards instead argues that chief executives act as more modest “facilitators” who “understand the opportunities for change in their environments and fashion strategies and tactics to exploit them” (ibid., 12). However, he

has argued that presidents “cannot reshape the contours of the political landscape” through the art of persuasion (ibid., 189). This raises the possibility that my study could find that neither appointees nor civil servants were able to effectively shape media coverage on behalf of the administrations they served.

One of the tools that modern presidents use in their efforts to persuade is the platform which President Theodore Roosevelt famously named the “bully pulpit.” The nation’s twenty-sixth president did not intend the phrase to contain diabolical implications; in the vernacular of his day “bully” meant “first-rate” or “excellent,” reflecting Roosevelt’s estimation that with the office came an opportunity to reach a wide audience which was beneficial. The bully pulpit is perceived to be particularly powerful because it is a prerogative all the president’s own, unencumbered by the other branches of government (Muir 1995, 14).

Modern presidents are availing themselves of this power more than ever. Presidential communications proliferated dramatically in the twentieth century. Jeffrey Tulis calculated that nineteenth-century presidents delivered a grand total of about 1,000 speeches – or an average of ten per year (1987, 16). By contrast, George C. Edwards III noted that, on average, President Clinton spoke in public 550 times per year (2003, 3). Furthermore, while nineteenth-century presidents had significant opportunities to speak to the people, they largely declined to do so, instead communicating in written messages addressed to the Congress. In the nineteenth century, less than one percent of presidential communications were delivered verbally. Today, presidents speak directly to the people: in the twentieth century, forty-two percent of presidential communications were delivered orally (Tulis 1987, 139).

If the source of the modern presidency’s power indeed lies in communications, then the members of the executive branch who develop and execute communications must be particularly

important to the president. Even if Edwards is correct that the power that presidents exercise is limited to exploiting opportunities which exist in the environment rather than creating new ones, it is especially important to the president that those who “facilitate” on his behalf be effective. As Edwards explained, “change is not inevitable, and facilitators make things happen that otherwise would not. Effective facilitators are skilled leaders who must recognize the opportunities that exist in their environments, choose which opportunities to pursue, when and in what order, and exploit them with skill, energy, perseverance, and will.” (2009, 12).

Furthermore, the mere fact that they shape media coverage makes public affairs officers key staffers for the president, since as discussed in the previous chapter, press reporting significantly influences public opinion. It is for this reason that federal public affairs officers were selected for this case study.

More specifically, public affairs officials who work on economic issues for the Department of the Treasury and its bureaus were selected for this study because they are especially vital communicators. The Treasury is one of the four original cabinet agencies created by President George Washington, which Thomas Cronin has classified as “the inner, or counseling, cabinet positions ... vested with high-priority responsibilities.” (1980, 276-277). Since modern chief executives assumed responsibility for the performance of the economy during the New Deal era, there have been few – if any – subjects more important to the president. Voters heavily prioritize the economy, given that the jobs, and thus livelihoods, of most citizens depend upon the performance of the nation’s economy. Since the 1946 inception of the Gallup poll asking Americans to name the most important problem the country faces, the economy has typically dominated (Wood 2007, 7-8). Re-election challengers most frequently criticize incumbent presidents over their handling of the economy (ibid., 59-60).

As a result, a large literature has consistently confirmed that the president's public approval ratings and re-election prospects are closely correlated with the state of the economy. Incumbents reap the benefits of strong economies and suffer electoral punishment for negative economic conditions – or, as Edward Tufte memorably declared, “as goes economic performance, so goes the election.” (Tufte 1978, 137; Erikson 1989; Lewis-Beck and Tien 2004; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001; Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000). Robert Erikson, for example, found that income change during the previous administration was a better predictor of the outcome of the next presidential election than whether voters even liked the candidates (1989, 568). Michael Nickelsburg and Helmut Norpoth studied University of Michigan Surveys of Consumers and New York Times/CBS News polls from 1976-1996 and found that a president's handling of the economy is as important to his public approval ratings as his handling of foreign policy (2000, 313). Additionally, in a 1992 study, Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Tom W. Rice found that, in all but one U.S. presidential election between 1948-1988, when the unemployment rate was declining, the incumbent or his party won the presidency – but when unemployment was not improving, the incumbent or his party lost (32).

However, in the 1992 election, President George H.W. Bush lost his bid for re-election, despite the fact that the economy had rebounded. The reason for this, Marc Hetherington found, was that negative reporting about the economy in the media altered the perceptions of voters (1996, 372). A variety of other studies confirm the importance of media coverage of the economy to the president. Richard Nadeau, Richard G. Niemi, David P. Fan and Timothy Amato studied the relationship between economic news and presidential popularity between 1977-1995 and found that news about the economy had significant effects on presidential approval ratings, often accounting for shifts of two percentage points or more. Media coverage of the economy

actually had a greater impact on presidential approval than objective economic indicators (1999, 126). Barry Burden and Anthony Mughan found that, during the Clinton administration, the media covered America's trade deficit with Japan more heavily than the U.S. trade deficit with Canada, and as a result the deficit with Japan impacted the president's approval ratings, while the deficit with Canada did not (2003, 555). And Dhavan V. Shah, Mark D. Watts, David Domke, David P. Fan, and Michael Fibison's study of presidential elections between 1984-1996 found not only that media coverage of the economy significantly predicted the selection of the president but also that "across all elections, economic coverage is a much more powerful predictor of presidential preference than noneconomic coverage." (1999, 937).

A different body of studies has argued that voters judge the president in whole or in part based upon their expectations of *future* economic performance (Fiorina 1981; MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson 1992; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001). However, whether the economic evaluations of voters are retrospective or prospective, it is clear that such evaluations heavily influence their assessments of the president.

Researchers have also found that voters place greater emphasis on the economy as a whole, rather than their personal financial circumstances, when they factor the economy into their voting decisions – a phenomenon known as "sociotropic voting." For example, Donald R. Kinder and D. Roderick Kiewiet found that "voting in congressional elections from 1956 to 1976 was influenced hardly at all by personal economic grievances. Those voters unhappy with changes in their financial circumstances, or those who had recently been personally affected by unemployment, showed little inclination to punish candidates of the incumbent party for their personal misfortunes." (1979, 495).

A similar phenomenon has been observed in presidential elections. Gregory Markus

studied data from National Election Studies between 1956-1984 and found that “personal financial predicaments ... carry weight in individuals’ voting decisions, but changing macroeconomic conditions are more important as determinants of election outcomes” in presidential elections. (1988, 137). Shah et al. likewise found that voters focus more on national economic conditions than on their own personal circumstances (1999). This provides an important opportunity for an incumbent president in a re-election campaign. The chief executive does not have to (and likely cannot) solve the personal economic problems of individual voters in order to win their votes; he simply needs to convince them that the nation’s overall economic conditions and/or prospects are good.

Therefore, presidents have an enormous incentive to attempt to influence the way the media cover – and thus the American people perceive – the economy. As we would accordingly expect, unless the country is experiencing a crisis, the President talks more about the economy than any other topic (Wood 2007, 60). The extraordinary level of presidential prioritization of and sensitivity to this issue is perhaps best evidenced by B. Dan Wood’s finding that presidents alter their economic rhetoric in response not to changes in actual economic conditions, but rather to changes in the *perceptions* of the American people about the economy (ibid., 163).

Presidential messaging on the economy is also uniquely powerful. This is because our modern economy is grounded in psychology; economic outcomes are determined in part by the attitudes about the economy that Americans hold. Indeed the term “public opinion” was first used by King Louis XVI’s finance minister, Jacques Necker, following the French Revolution, as he endeavored to boost confidence in the money market in Paris (Altheide and Johnson 1980, 8). Today, in the United States, two-thirds of the country’s economic activity is driven by consumer spending – and the remaining third is strongly impacted by consumer spending decisions (Wood

2007, 138-139). Thus, if presidents can convincingly project optimism about the economy, they can increase consumer confidence, which is one measure of the strength of the economy. B. Dan Wood's study of all public remarks by twelve presidents over sixty-three years confirmed that optimistic presidential rhetoric led to improved consumer confidence, which ultimately improved both actual economic performance and presidential approval ratings (*ibid.*, 159, 167). Of course, as the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftereffects make clear, presidential rhetoric is certainly not a panacea for the country's economic challenges. Nevertheless, research shows that the president can reap the rewards of increased public approval if he and his staff are successfully able to shape the way the American people view the economy – even if actual economic conditions are less promising than the government officials project. As we have seen, increased public approval, in turn, helps presidents get re-elected and, as Neustadt showed, achieve their goals in office (1990, 73).

Further confirmation of the importance of the Treasury comes from a survey of fifty reporters who cover federal agencies and departments. Asked to rank federal agencies by their importance, reporters gave the most mentions to the Treasury (Morgan 1986, 55). Given the unique importance of media coverage of the economy to the president, there are, then, perhaps no public affairs officials more crucial to the president than those who work on economic issues. If civil servants are found to be reliable advocates for the president in such roles, the finding would likely be applicable in lesser-stakes environments as well.

These circumstances are also ripe for encouraging officials to engage in tactics of the permanent campaign. The fact that the president's rhetoric responds to public *perceptions* about the economy – rather than objective economic data – is a clear indication that the White House is on a permanent campaign when it comes to this issue. Given the extraordinary importance of the

economy to the president, if an administration were to extend the permanent campaign beyond the White House to any government agency, the Treasury appears to be the most likely place to find it being waged. My interviews with public affairs officers about the tactics they employ were designed to determine whether they are on this campaign.

This case study further poses a critical test of appointee competence because presidents are likely to place their best appointees at the Treasury. Gabriel Horton and David E. Lewis have found that presidents place their most competent appointees in agencies that are most prominent and critical to their agenda (2009, 6, 8). Thus, if presidents are found to be better served by career executives than by *Treasury* appointees – who should be among the most effective appointees – the finding would likely apply to other appointees as well.

The Treasury also provides a solid, if not most extreme, test of the loyalty of civil servants. In the United States, economic policy is clearly the subject of major ideological dispute. The Treasury has in the past not garnered the scholarly and media attention of very extreme cases – such as the virtual cottage industry of studies on the Environmental Protection Agency, where civil servants were said to be activists, especially under President Reagan (Golden 2000; Maranto 2005; Ringquist 1995; Waterman and Rouse 1998; Waterman 1989; Wood 1988; Wood and Waterman 1993; Wood and Waterman 1994). Nevertheless, the agency is the site of decision making on areas of significant partisan disagreement, including the controversial responses to the 2008 financial crisis undertaken under both the administrations studied.

Finally, I believe that using the Treasury for this case study significantly improved the quality of my results. Because I previously served as a Treasury spokesperson in the Obama administration and had a friend who served in the Treasury during the Bush administration, I was



able to use my access and contacts to earn the trust and participation of research subjects, who rarely grant interviews to discuss their work. Furthermore, because my research subjects knew that I already had an intimate familiarity with the Department's public affairs operations, I believe they were at least somewhat more likely to be honest in the interviews –knowing that if they conveyed inaccurate information, I would sometimes be able to identify it as such. My deep familiarity with the programs, people, and myriad acronyms to which my research subjects referred allowed for particularly rich conversations. I typically did not need to ask my research subjects to explain references they made to particular initiatives, individuals, events or acronyms, unless such information was actually relevant to my research.

On a practical basis, it also would not have been possible to conduct this research in a more important government agency. The Secretary of State is considered the most important member of the Cabinet, and is followed by the Secretary of the Treasury and then Secretary of Defense in order of precedence. These three agencies are practically universally recognized as the most important, and are the only three agencies which have dedicated in-house press corps that could provide the detailed independent corroborations utilized in this study. However, unlike the Treasury Department, the State Department relies heavily upon civil servants in public affairs positions, which would make the comparisons of appointees and civil servants utilized in this study unworkable. Likewise, so much of the Defense Department's information is classified that their spokespeople would not be able to share facts and examples highly relevant to their work in such an interview, making it practically impossible to arrive at informed judgments.

Interestingly, the portfolios of Treasury spokespeople include International Affairs (a portfolio that handles U.S. economic diplomacy) and Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (a portfolio responsible for the tracking of the financial assets of terrorists). My interview subjects

therefore included spokespeople handling the diplomatic, economic, and defense issues most critical to the president.

### Data and Measures

Most previous studies attempted to assess the loyalty of civil servants quantitatively and exogenously, by examining whether indicators such as agency outputs or votes comport with the president's wishes (Cohen 1985; Eisner and Meier 1990; Moe 1982; Moe 1985; Stewart and Cromartie 1982; Wood 1988; Wood 1990; Wood and Anderson 1993; Wood and Waterman 1993; Wood and Waterman 1994). Yet there are strong limitations to measuring a subject as complex and nuanced as human loyalty without ever interacting with the individuals being studied. By contrast, my study replicates Golden's (2000) approach to qualitative analysis by conducting detailed interviews with government officials in an effort to obtain similarly rich, explanatory, and nuanced results.

#### I. Interviews with Government Officials

To test my hypotheses, I conducted detailed interviews with ten political appointees and seven civil servants who previously worked or currently work in public affairs for the Department of the Treasury and its subsidiary agencies. The political appointees all worked as spokespeople for the Treasury. Examples of possible spokesperson portfolios include Domestic Finance, International Affairs, Tax Policy, Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, and the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), through which the U.S. government purchased financial assets in order to help stabilize the economy in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. While I will likewise not list the exact bureaus for which my interview subjects who were civil servants

worked, in order to protect their identities, examples of such bureaus are the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, Internal Revenue Service, Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, and U.S. Mint. The inclusion of different bureaus provided a desired diversity in my sample.

To account for any differences between the approaches of Democratic and Republican administrations, I conducted half the interviews of political appointees with individuals who have served or are serving under President Obama, and half with appointees who served under President George W. Bush. All the civil servants whom I interviewed had previous experience working in public affairs for a government agency during at least one Republican administration (predominantly during the administration of President George W. Bush), though not necessarily within the Treasury.

The Obama appointees whom I interviewed were all colleagues, who I met while working at the Treasury, or individuals to whom I was introduced through my former Treasury colleagues. I was introduced to one Bush appointee through a former Bush administration official, whom I worked with at a national foundation several years previously. This Bush appointee in turn connected me to several other Bush appointees who I interviewed. I reached two other Bush appointees by contacting them directly to introduce myself via email. All of the appointees whom I interviewed started at the Treasury in Schedule C positions. However, as I will later discuss, the aggregate job functions of the Bush appointees who I interviewed were at a slightly higher level than those of the Obama appointees.

One of the civil servants was introduced to me by a former appointee. I reached the other six civil servants by researching their contact information online and calling or emailing them. In order to make the basis of comparison between the political appointees (who typically serve in

higher-level posts) and civil servants as comparable as possible, I interviewed civil servants who were working at a senior level in their public affairs offices whenever possible. Four of the civil servants served in positions in which they led public affairs for their bureau, while three served as spokespeople or public affairs liaisons.

While every Obama appointee and nearly every Bush appointee with whom I requested an interview agreed to participate in this research project, several of the civil servants who I approached did not. This is likely the case in part because I did not have pre-existing relationships with these individuals. As I will discuss in chapters 5 and 7, the willingness of these civil servants to grant my requests for interview may be an indicator that my sample is overall somewhat more likely than the average civil servant to be open in their interactions with reporters, a fact that could have resulted in a sample which over-represented civil servants who leak information to the press.

I felt that I had a comfortable, strong rapport with every appointee and civil servant whom I interviewed, with the exception of Bush Appointee 5, who will be discussed in greater detail below. It nevertheless remains the case that, because I was appointed by a Democratic president and because I had previously worked closely with all or most of the Obama appointees, the Bush appointees may have viewed me with less trust than the Obama appointees, and may therefore have been less forthcoming. However, I was struck by the professionalism, candor, and respect granted to me by all the Bush appointees, with the exception of Bush Appointee 5.

Of course, despite our strong rapport, it certainly seems reasonable to project that if the officials whom I interviewed had engaged in truly egregious behavior in their positions, they might have sought to protect themselves by not sharing such details with me. However, the readiness with which both groups discussed situations that reflected poorly on their offices,

which is evident in the chapters that follow, led me to conclude that my interview subjects were overall very forthcoming (again, with the caveat of a single research subject, Bush Appointee 5). The accuracy, validity, and representativeness of my results are considered in detail in the Conclusion.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I tested and refined my questions by asking them to a former public affairs official who worked in the administration of New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg.

All of the interviews lasted at least one hour; most lasted closer to an hour and a half. The interviews were all conducted in person in Washington, D.C. or in New York City, with the exception of one interview conducted by telephone because the personal circumstances of my interview subject precluded an in-person meeting. This subject was particularly loquacious and detailed in our discussion, so I did not feel that the loss of face-to-face contact diminished the quality of his responses in a significant way.

Some of the interviews were conducted in the offices of the American Political Science Association in Washington, which generously granted me office space in their Centennial Center for Political Science and Public Affairs, for the purpose of conducting this research.

Following the interviews, I followed up with my research subjects by email and telephone in order to ask additional questions and/or clarify their responses.

### *Measuring the Competence and Effectiveness of the Government Officials*

In my interviews with the government officials, I used seven measures in order to assess the relative competence and effectiveness of the appointees and civil servants. As will later be discussed, in order to obtain further information about the relative competence and effectiveness

of the two groups of government officials, I supplemented the information that the government officials provided to me with additional questions which I asked to the reporters I interviewed.

First, I asked the officials how much access they had to the principals for whom they worked. Greater access to senior officials would be one indicator of a public affairs officer's greater efficacy, since it would allow the public affairs officer to obtain important information about the agency's current activities and priorities, to inform their media strategies and responses to reporters.

Second, I queried the officials on their knowledge of their subject matter portfolios, by asking questions such as "I know that you arrange media interviews for your principal(s). If you were to do the interviews yourself, how well do you think you'd do?" and "many of the reporters who cover economic issues have been doing so for a long time. Do you think that gives them an advantage over you? How do you handle it?" It is critical for public affairs officers to understand the substance of the policy portfolio(s) for which they are responsible; otherwise, they cannot meaningfully respond to reporters' queries; craft substantive arguments to advance the administration's goals; identify inaccuracies in news reports; or develop meaningful strategies in order to attain media coverage that accurately and persuasively conveys the administration's policy positions.

Third, I asked the officials to estimate their response times to media inquiries. Because reporters work on tight deadlines, if an administration is to have an opportunity to shape and share their point of view in news stories, they must respond to press inquiries rapidly. The ability to do so is thus an essential qualification of an effective public affairs officer.

Fourth, I asked the officials about the quality of their relationships with the press. A competent public affairs officer would be expected to stay in regular contact with the reporters

who cover his or her agency, not only to respond to queries but also to proactively pitch stories and obtain intelligence about stories on which reporters are working. It is to be expected that officials will sometimes have disagreements with the press; indeed, the ability and willingness to forcefully argue the administration's point of view is a sign of an effective public affairs officer. At the same time, a competent public affairs professional must be able to handle such exchanges respectfully and professionally, in order to maintain productive working relationships with the members of the press who they will seek to influence on many future stories.

Fifth, I asked the appointees and civil servants how much success they felt they had in influencing the topics covered by reporters and the tone and content of media reports. Obviously, their own assessments would be subjective and I sought corroboration of their claims in my interviews with reporters. However, these queries were designed to help me obtain insight into the standards by which the officials judged the outcomes of their work and how they defined success and failure.

I also asked the government officials whether they thought that appointees or civil servants are more effective at conveying the administration's messages in the press, in order to obtain insight into the observations they had made regarding the relative competence and effectiveness of their colleagues.

Additionally, I considered whether the officials appeared to employ savvy tactics in order to advance the administration's goals.

### Possible Causal Factors

My assessments of the efficacy of the officials took into account the varying levels of importance and salience of the issues for which they were or are responsible, as officials working

on less high-profile issues cannot be expected to exert as much influence over the media agenda as officials working on the most newsworthy topics.

I also queried the officials on several variables in order to determine whether they impacted their relative efficacy.

First, I queried the officials about their previous work experience, in order to determine whether one group had more relevant and/or extensive prior professional experience that might have increased their efficacy.

Second, I asked the officials about their educational backgrounds, as another way of comparing the training that they brought to their jobs which might have impacted their efficacy.

Third, I asked how long the officials served in their positions. With greater tenure, officials might become more skilled in their positions; it is also possible that they would develop routine ways of doing their work and that individuals who came in with fresh energy and ways of thinking could be more effective. My other measures were therefore designed in part to determine how tenure impacted the effectiveness of my interview subjects.

Finally, I queried the officials on the manageability of their workloads and how they spent their time, in order to determine whether the legendarily long hours that other researchers have found appointees to work influenced their effectiveness.

### *Measuring the Loyalty of the Government Officials*

In my interviews with the government officials, I used six measures in order to assess the relative loyalty of the appointees and civil servants.

First, I asked the officials what someone in their position should do if asked to advocate a policy with which he or she personally disagreed, in order to determine whether the officials



believed that it would be appropriate to attempt to undermine an administration's goals.

Second, I asked both groups of government officials how often they personally disagreed with an administration policy they were required to advocate and how they reacted in such circumstances, in order to determine whether they had ever engaged in acts of disloyalty to an administration they served.

Third, I asked the officials whether leaks to the press occurred in their offices, and, if so, if they were aware of whether the officials responsible for the leaks were appointees or civil servants. This question was designed to serve as one measure of whether appointees or civil servants were responsible for the majority of leaks during the tenure of my interview subjects.

Fourth, I asked the officials whether they personally had ever been tempted to leak information to the press. This question was designed to determine whether they had in fact ever leaked to the press, without directly asking the question and thereby potentially making my research subjects defensive.

### Possible Causal Factors

I also explored two possible causal factors for differences in the loyalty of the two groups.

First, I asked both groups of officials whether their personal political views impacted their work. This was designed to determine whether the officials attempted to pursue their own personal goals in their work, and, if so, if such attempts ever conflicted with the goals of the administration(s) they served.

Second, I asked the appointees whether they would consider working as a Treasury spokesperson under an administration of a different political party, in order to determine whether

and how loyalty to the president they served was a factor in their motivation for serving in their positions.

### *Measuring Whether the Government Officials Are on a Permanent Campaign*

In my interviews with the government officials, I used nine measures in order to assess whether they were conducting such a campaign.

First, I asked the officials how much time they spent focusing on the profiles and images of the officials for whom they worked, and whether it was a good use of their time. This question was designed to determine whether the officials focused on the administration's image at the expense of policy priorities.

Second, I asked the officials to describe the most sophisticated techniques they used to shape what reporters covered, in order to determine whether they would report availing themselves of permanent campaign tactics.

Third, I asked the government officials whether they ever attempted to appeal to the emotions, as opposed to the reason, of the American people in the messages they crafted. As discussed in chapter 2, Blumenthal has argued that, as part of the permanent campaign, politicians play to the emotions of the people instead of fostering rational policy debate (1982, 21).

Fourth, I asked the government officials whether they ever utilized public opinion polls in their work, and if so, how. As discussed in chapter 2, as part of the permanent campaign, Hecla has charged presidential aides with using public opinion polls to make policy decisions, in cases when the country would be better served by making unpopular choices that would serve the nation's long-term health (2000, 30-34).

As also discussed in chapter 2, McClellan has reported that, as part of the permanent campaign, presidential aides distort and withhold information requested by the media in order to bolster short-term support for the president (2008). I therefore next asked a series of questions designed to determine whether my interview subjects engaged in such tactics. Fifth, I asked the government officials whether they believed it is ever appropriate for someone in their position to withhold information requested by the press, what the circumstances would be, and whether this happened often or rarely in their work. Sixth, I asked the government officials whether they believed it is ever appropriate for someone in their position to shade the truth, what the circumstances would be, and whether this happened often or rarely in their work. Seventh, I asked the government officials whether they believed that it would be possible for someone in their position to tell untruths to make the president look good, and whether they or their colleagues had ever attempted to do so. Eighth, I asked the government officials what percentage of the messages they sought to promulgate they would describe as ideas and narratives, as well as how they developed and sculpted narratives to make their points, in an effort to determine whether they distorted facts in the process. Ninth, and finally, I asked the government officials how their offices determined how to handle information that was potentially damaging or embarrassing.

### Possible Causal Factors

To measure possible factors that could account for whether or not a permanent campaign was being practiced, I first queried the government officials about their workloads, in an effort to determine how much time they had to engage in proactive tactics and therefore whether the potential for conducting a permanent campaign existed.

Second, I asked the officials how much of their time they spent proactively attempting to influence the media, and how much time they spent reactively responding to requests from reporters. This question was designed to serve as another measure of whether the potential for a permanent campaign was present, by identifying how much time the officials enjoyed to engage in proactive tactics.

Third, I asked the officials to describe the end goals of their work. Fourth, I asked them to what degree their end goal was to build public support for the president. Both of these questions were designed to determine whether the officials were motivated by the goal of the permanent campaign, which is to build support for the president.

Finally, I observed whether those government officials who held journalism degrees reported themselves to be less willing than the other officials to withhold or distort information from the press – and, if so, whether this suggested that the values imbued during their journalism training acted as a mediating variable.

## II. Interviews with Reporters

For an independent assessment of the civil servants and political appointees, I also interviewed seven reporters who interacted frequently with these officials. All of the members of the press interviewed were individuals who reported on the Treasury while I served as a spokesperson for the Department from 2011-2012. In order to protect their identities, I will not disclose the specific outlets for which my research subjects work or worked. However, they all currently cover or previously covered the economy for national, daily U.S. newspapers or wire services, which I consider to be the most influential media outlets in the country.

Nearly every reporter whom I approached granted me an interview. I had an excellent

rapport with all of the reporters I interviewed, which likely stemmed in part from the fact that I had interacted frequently and/or traveled extensively with most of them on Secretary Timothy Geithner's international trips, when I worked at the Treasury.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I tested and refined my questions by asking them of a former reporter and editor for outlets including the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, who currently teaches journalism.

To ensure that the reporters were able to provide a basis of comparison between a Democratic and Republican administration, I only interviewed members of the press who covered Treasury issues under both President Obama and President George W. Bush. However, two of the reporters whom I interviewed covered Treasury issues under the Bush administration significantly less extensively than during the Obama administration, and a third indicated that his memory of the Bush administration had somewhat faded, so it seems likely that the responses of reporters were more heavily informed by their interactions with the Obama administration.

The length of the interviews was on average just over one hour. All were conducted in person in Washington, D.C. Afterwards, I contacted several of the reporters by telephone or email to ask them to clarify and/or expand upon their responses.

### *Measuring the Competence and Effectiveness of the Government Officials*

To measure the relative competence and effectiveness of the appointees and civil servants, I first asked the reporters how well they thought that both groups of government officials knew the subject matter for which they were responsible. As previously discussed, it is critical for a public affairs officer to understand their policy portfolio in order to effectively craft and rebut arguments and advance an administration's policy positions.

Second, I asked the reporters which group of government officials responded to them more quickly. As previously discussed, the ability to rapidly respond to media queries is essential to a public affairs officer's ability to shape media coverage that is often produced under extreme deadline pressure.

Third, I asked what both groups of officials did when they were upset with the reporter's coverage. While, as previously discussed, it is critical for a public affairs officer to forcefully advance an administration's messages and rebut alternate arguments and critiques, it is essential for them to do so while maintaining positive working relationships with reporters, in order to preserve their ability to shape future media coverage.

Fourth, I asked the reporters to describe the degree to which both groups of officials influenced the topics on which they ultimately reported, as well as the tone and content of their coverage, in an effort to determine which group of officials was more successful at shaping press reports.

Fifth, I asked the reporters whether they found themselves more skeptical of the claims made by either appointees or civil servants. This was designed to test my hypothesis that reporters might apply greater skepticism to the claims of appointees because reporters believe that the *raison d'être* of such officials is to make the president look good – a factor that would diminish their efficacy.

Finally, I asked the reporters which group of government officials was better at getting them the information they needed for their stories. While it will sometimes be in an administration's interests to withhold information, effective public affairs officials must generally be able to provide reporters with the answers they seek; otherwise, they will both damage their relationships with reporters and cede control of the narrative to other actors who do

respond to the press.

### *Measuring the Loyalty of the Government Officials*

I asked the reporters whether government officials have ever leaked information to them or otherwise conveyed their disagreement with official administration policy, and whether political appointees or civil servants have done so more frequently. This question was designed to measure the relative frequency with which both groups of government officials have engaged in acts of disloyalty to the administrations they served.

### *Measuring Whether the Government Officials Are on a Permanent Campaign*

To measure whether the government officials were engaging in a permanent campaign, I asked the reporters to describe the savvier things that federal economic agencies did to shape the coverage they received in the press, in an effort to ascertain whether they would describe permanent campaign tactics.

In an effort to determine whether the officials ever distorted and/or withheld information from the reporters, I asked whether the reporters ever became aware of practices conducted by either group of government officials which they considered to be inappropriate. If reporters did not respond by indicating that the officials had ever withheld information, I asked the reporters directly whether they thought that the officials had done so. Likewise, if reporters did not respond by indicating that the officials had ever lied to them, I asked the reporters directly whether they thought that the officials had done so.

My complete interview questions are listed in appendix A.

### Promoting Honesty and Candor in Interview Subjects

To promote honesty and candor in my interview subjects, I pledged to keep their identities confidential. This was necessary because I asked sensitive questions, such as whether the government officials had ever leaked information to the press – an offense for which they could potentially be fired. Furthermore, if the identities and responses of the officials were to become public knowledge, their future employment prospects could have been adversely affected. Likewise, if the identities and certain responses of the reporters were to become public knowledge – such as, for example, their assessments of the competence of the public affairs officers with whom they work – their relationships with officials on whom they depend to do their jobs might have been compromised. I therefore do not disclose the identities of the individuals who I interviewed in this study. As a further measure to protect the identities of my research subjects, I refer to every interviewee in this publication as “he,” regardless of his or her gender. I selected masculine language because the majority of my research subjects (seventeen of my twenty-four interviewees) were male.

I asked my research subjects to determine the time and place of the interviews, in order to ensure that they would be comfortable. As a safeguard to protect the identities of my interviewees and to promote candor in the interviews, I did not record the conversations. I instead typed notes during the interviews and stored them on a password-protected computer and password-protected website designed for data storage. My notes were coded with letters and numbers, instead of names, of interview subjects. The master coding sheet was stored in a locked box in a separate location. I also requested the oral, instead of written, consent of my interview subjects so that there would not be other written records of the identities of the interviewees.

I have omitted specific facts and details which could be used to identify research subjects in this report. If I had questions about whether a specific detail I wished to include could be used



to identify a research subject, I reached out to the interviewee to ask whether it was acceptable for me to include the information.

My use of human subjects in this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the City University of New York.

### Bush Appointee 5

I have a very low level of confidence in the veracity of the responses of Bush Appointee 5, who is described in greater detail in Appendix B. While I describe his responses throughout chapters four, five, and six, I nevertheless viewed them with greater skepticism than the responses of my other interview subjects when conducting my analysis of the results. Fortunately, however, I felt that I established strong trust and rapport with the other twenty-three of my interview subjects (ninety-six percent of my interview subjects), leaving me confident regarding the overall results of my research – a matter which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 7.

## Chapter 4: Results: Efficacy of Appointees vs. Civil Servants

### Introduction

This chapter reviews the results of my interviews on the relative efficacy of political appointees and civil servants in Treasury public affairs positions. As discussed in chapter 3, I define effectiveness as success in advancing the administration's goals. I hypothesized that civil servants would be more effective administration advocates because their longer tenure would give them greater knowledge of their policy portfolios and stronger relationships with the reporters who covered their agencies; reporters would be more skeptical of the claims of appointees because they would believe that the *raison d'être* of appointees is to make the president look good; the massive workloads of appointees would diminish their efficacy; and appointees would spend more time attempting to boost the images of their principals, which is less helpful to the president than advancing his policies. However, I also anticipated that appointees might have efficacy advantages in that their bosses might make more time for them because they place greater importance on the press. I used nine measures in order to investigate which group is more effective in such roles.

First, I asked the officials how much access they had to the principals for whom they worked. Greater access would improve a public affairs officer's efficacy by giving him or her greater information about agency activities and priorities, allowing the official to respond rapidly and substantively to reporters' questions and to craft and implement more detailed and accurate media strategies.

Second, I queried the officials on their knowledge of their subject matter portfolios. Of course, it would be critical for an effective public affairs officer to possess a deeply sophisticated understanding of his or her policy portfolio in order to communicate it effectively. Third, I asked

about their response times to media inquiries. An effective public affairs officer would need to be able to respond rapidly to media queries in order to effectively influence media coverage prior to reporters' deadlines. Fourth, I asked the officials about the quality of their relationships with the press. While it is to be expected that effective officials would sometimes disagree with reporters and would push back against reporters' representations of their administration when it was not favorable, at the same time it would be critical for them to maintain ongoing dialogue with reporters and professional working relationships in order to inform future stories. Fifth, I asked the officials how much success they believed they had in influencing the topics covered by reporters and the tone and content of media reports. Of course, such self assessments would be subjective and potentially biased, however the question was designed to provide an indication of how the officials themselves assessed their own work.

For independent assessments of the officials, I also asked the Treasury reporters whom I interviewed to assess the appointees and civil servants with whom they worked on stories on measures two through five: their relative knowledge of their subject matter portfolios, response times to media inquiries, relationships with themselves, and success in influencing the topics covered by reporters and the tone and content of media reports.

Sixth, I asked the reporters which group they judged to be more credible sources, since reporters would be expected to give greater weight in their stories and more favorable coverage to sources who they deemed to be credible. Seventh, I analyzed the responses of reporters regarding whether the officials provided them with the information they sought. While it might be in the interests of a public affairs officer not to answer every question a reporter asked, an effective public affairs officer would be expected to generally provide reporters with information in response to their queries; otherwise, the administration would cede control of the narrative to

other sources and leave reporters feeling frustrated, a factor which would likely influence their media coverage.

Eighth, I asked the government officials whether they thought that appointees or civil servants are more effective at conveying the administration's messages in the press.

Finally, I considered whether the government officials used savvy tactics in order to advance the administration's goals.

### Measuring Causal Factors

I also investigated four possible factors that could account for the greater relative efficacy of either group. First, I queried the officials about their previous work experience, in order to determine whether either group brought greater professional experience to their Treasury roles that boosted their efficacy. Second, I asked the officials about the educational qualifications they brought to their jobs, in order to determine whether either group had better training that influenced their efficacy. Third, I asked the officials how long they served in their Treasury positions, in an effort to determine how tenure impacts efficacy. On the one hand, longer tenure could improve an official's skill at his or her job; on the other hand, serving for long periods of time could cause them to become ingrained in their thinking or even exhausted, leaving the Treasury lacking fresh ideas, perspective, and energy. Finally, I queried the officials on how they spent their time and the manageability of their workloads, in order to determine whether the legendarily long hours that other researchers have found appointees to work influenced their effectiveness.

### I. Access to Principals

Access to principals is an indicator of a public affairs official's efficacy because such

officials require information about their leadership team's priorities and activities in order to implement timely and accurate media strategies that advance the administration's goals. I hypothesized that one area in which appointees might have an effectiveness advantage is in their access to the principals for whom they work, because the more senior administration officials for whom appointees work might place greater value on the press. In keeping with this hypothesis, most appointees were adamant that they enjoyed, in the words of Obama Appointee 2, a "really high" level of access to their principals. Bush Appointee 2 described having "tremendous access to principals;" Bush Appointee 1 was "very, very satisfied." The only caveat among appointees was a single appointee who indicated that it would have been helpful to attend meetings typically attended by his boss. Additionally, one Bush appointee and one Obama appointee indicated that it took time for them to initially gain the trust of their principals. However, many indicated that they could walk into the offices of their principals when they needed them; "I could pull him out of a meeting if I absolutely had to." (Obama Appointee 3). The appointees uniformly indicated that this access was critical to their ability to do their jobs, because they needed to be able to both get answers for reporters and understand what was happening in the building.

There were not significant differences in the responses of civil servants, who generally indicated they had the access they needed to their principals. The exception was Civil Servant 6, who had enjoyed daily access to previous principals but now might sometimes not be in touch with his principal for several days. He indicated that this "affects my level of comfort, but as far as affecting my work, I don't really think it has." Otherwise, civil servants generally indicated that they were "reasonably comfortable" with their level of access (Civil Servant 4), "very pleased" (Civil Servant 5), "it's not an issue" (Civil Servant 7), or they could walk into their principal's office anytime (Civil Servants 1 and 2, who both attributed their access to the small

size of their offices). Civil Servant 3 was closest to the appointees in describing his access as “100 percent, never any problem;” Civil Servant 7 likewise described his access as “key to success.”

Thus, both groups generally reported that they had the access to the principals which they needed to do their jobs. However, appointees placed greater emphasis on their *very high* levels of access, and were more adamant that this was critical to their work. To be sure, these differences in nuance might be explained by the fact that in politics, one’s importance is often measured by one’s level of access, and therefore political appointees might be more eager to brag about or even overstate the access they enjoyed. However, I suspect that the appointees did in fact have particularly high levels of access to their principals. The accounts of appointees were certainly consonant with what I witnessed and experienced firsthand, when I served as a Treasury spokesperson in the Obama administration from 2011-2012.

Adding to the efficacy advantage this particularly high level of access gives to appointees is, of course, the fact that the principals for whom appointees work are responsible for particularly important and high-profile issues. Based upon their responses, appointees therefore seem to enjoy particularly significant access to information that is particularly in demand by reporters.

This finding is corroborated by the fact that, when asked about the strengths of public affairs appointees, several reporters volunteered that appointees are able to obtain information from key principals. The strength of appointees was described by Reporter 5 as “their more direct access to the people who are making the decisions in the agency.” As Reporter 7 explained, “civil servants aren’t always keyed in to what’s going on in the same way political are;” Reporter 2 concurred that among civil servants, there is an “occasional lack of awareness

around political realities.” Reporter 3 likewise believed that appointees “often can be well connected and close to the axis of power so ... they can be well informed on decision making.”

I therefore concluded that this somewhat higher level of access to principals gives appointees a slight effectiveness advantage. However, as will later be discussed, the overall effectiveness of appointees is diminished by other factors.

## **II. Knowledge of their Subject Matter Portfolios**

I next measured the officials’ knowledge of their subject matter portfolios. Without a nuanced understanding of their issues, they could not effectively answer reporters’ queries, identify inaccurate reporting, rebut arguments, or plan media strategies to achieve the administration’s policy goals. Almost all of the political appointees reported learning the substance of their subject matter portfolios on the job, such as by attending meetings, reading internal memos, and otherwise learning from the Treasury policy staff. Bush Appointee 1 described the experience as “trial by fire” and “very challenging.” Bush Appointee 3 explained that the way he learned was that he “asked a lot of questions of very smart people and read newspapers and then asked more questions.”

As will later be discussed, only one Bush appointee and one Obama appointee reported having previous economic and/or financial knowledge that was useful to them in their Treasury posts. However, even the appointee with the strongest background in economics described a “very steep learning curve.” Obama Appointee 5 recalled that he discussed his lack of knowledge of his policy matter portfolio with a senior Treasury official when he interviewed for his job, and the official told him that “we need someone to ask questions, to help us put this in English, we need some people here that don’t know [the substance].”

By contrast, five of the seven civil servants reported already having knowledge of their subject matter portfolios when they assumed their Treasury public affairs posts; two of these civil servants had previously worked in policy on their issues at the Treasury and one had previously reported as a journalist on his subject matter portfolio. One of the civil servants with previous experience relevant to his portfolio indicated that when he interacted with Treasury officials who were more accustomed to working with spokespeople who were appointees, they were surprised by his command of his portfolio. “I had a lot of feedback .... that was unusual when it comes to communications professionals,” he said.

The appointees generally indicated that it took them about six months to start to feel comfortable with the content of their subject matter portfolios (or in the words of Bush Appointee 3, to find it “less daunting”), and they achieved strong mastery after about a year. While two of the civil servants indicated that it took them six months to feel comfortable with their policy portfolios, three others indicated feeling comfortable “right away,” “within a matter of weeks,” or “at most [within] a couple of months.” One civil servant who lacked relevant previous policy experience indicated that it took him a year. An outlier response was that of a civil servant who reported that it took him four to five years. This civil servant had served in his bureau since the inception of some of its programs and previously worked on policy and indicated that it therefore “wasn’t hard” to learn the substance, however he indicated that the mechanics of major financial transactions were complicated – perhaps evincing a particularly high standard for feeling fully comfortable in such a position. This suggests that the prior experience and knowledge of civil servants may have allowed some of them to “hit the ground running” a bit faster than the average appointee.

Asked how well they ultimately mastered their subject matter portfolios, seven of the



appointees indicated “very well,” two appointees indicated “pretty well,” and one indicated that he never mastered the subject, though this appointee’s subject matter was a new portfolio for the Treasury, and an undertaking which the government had never previously attempted, making it particularly challenging for everyone involved. There were not significant differences between the responses of the Bush and Obama appointees in this regard. By contrast, just two civil servants indicated that they knew the substance of their subject matter portfolios “very well,” while five civil servants indicated that they understood the content “pretty well.”

This discrepancy is contradictory, given that, as I will later discuss, the civil servants both brought significantly more policy knowledge to their posts and had significantly longer tenure in their jobs. It is certainly possible that the results indicate that appointees work harder, are more competent, and/or perceive the stakes to be higher, and therefore better master the content of their policy portfolios. However, given that civil servants with the most policy experience typically reported knowing their subject matters only “pretty well,” I suspect that these responses may actually reflect higher standards among civil servants for policy mastery. Additionally and interestingly, the two civil servants who were most confident and reported themselves to know their subject matter “very well” ranked among the most politically experienced. Although outside the scope of this study, the discrepancy could also point to differences in the confidence and/or modesty of the two groups.

The responses to my next two questions further confirm my proposed explanation for this discrepancy. When I raised the stakes, appointees became significantly less confident in their policy mastery. Treasury spokespeople typically book and prepare senior officials for media interviews. I asked the public affairs officials how well they think they would do if they were to conduct the interviews themselves, in place of their principals. Here, only two appointees

indicated that they would do “very well.” These were the two appointees, who worked at the Treasury the longest and the only two appointees who were promoted to other public affairs roles within the Treasury after first serving as spokespeople.

A third appointee indicated he believed he could have handled 80-85 percent of the interviews; two appointees indicated they would do “pretty well;” one appointee indicated “okay but not well;” and two indicated that they could do well on the overall message but not on technical matters of policy expertise. In the words of one appointee, “I think people like us know what we want to achieve through an interview and can tell [principals] overall what we want to communicate, but when we have the Assistant Secretary talking to *The Economist*, that conversation gets to a level I’m not familiar with.”

Two appointees were clear that they could not handle such interviews. One responded “oh my God, not well. It depends on the interview, but if it’s an off-the-record background briefing I don’t have a lot of confidence in my ability to do that, I could do the talking points, but not the way [the senior administration officials] did it.” A final appointee indicated “probably not very well because [the issues are] really complicated. Politics is easy because everyone has an opinion. Trying to bullshit your way through financial stuff is impossible.” Overall then, even though most political appointees indicated that they mastered their subjects “very well,” they seemed to mean by this that they could handle the talking points. They generally (though not always) did not master their subject matter at a level that would allow them to engage deeply and substantively on the nuance of technical and policy issues with major reporters.

Interestingly, here the confidence of civil servants seemed slightly higher. Three civil servants indicated that they did in fact conduct media interviews; two indicated that they would do “pretty well” with one adding “I’m pretty comfortable with that;” one said he conducted a lot

of interviews on background and thought he would do well on the record but might get nervous and make a mistake; and one indicated that he would not do the interviews “nearly as well” because he was “blessed” with a talented principal. However, the final civil servant’s response seemed to be more reflective of his principal’s skill than his own. Indeed, we should both hope and expect that the heads of Treasury bureaus will be more knowledgeable than their public affairs staff. Overall, then, civil servants appeared somewhat more comfortable than appointees with granting interviews to reporters – a concrete indication of their mastery of their policy portfolios.

As a final way of discussing their policy knowledge and how it affects their work, I asked the appointees and civil servants whether the fact that the reporters who cover economic issues have been doing so for a long time gave the reporters an advantage. One appointee indicated that the question was not applicable to him because the subject matter for which he was responsible was new, and the Treasury had never previously conducted such an initiative. Three Obama appointees and three Bush appointees indicated that it did give reporters an advantage, at least initially or at times. In the words of Bush Appointee 2, “obviously it did because they have that wealth of history and knowledge.” Bush Appointee 4 likewise indicated “it did at the beginning and that’s what scared me.”

Two Obama appointees indicated that they did not feel reporters had a knowledge advantage. For Obama Appointee 4, “the great thing about Treasury and its principals is they’re excellent resources, so in arranging these interviews I always knew what the top line, big picture stuff was and the principals knew the stuff just as well if not better than the reporters, so the system worked, I think.” Here again, however, it was clear that reporters had greater knowledge than this appointee; he simply found this to be unproblematic.

Bush Appointee 3 likewise indicated that this advantage was not necessarily a problem because reporters “were more than happy to answer questions and brag about their knowledge. I wasn’t talking about what I didn’t know and they get that, they respect that. What they want is your help with access, quotes, ... that type of thing.” Bush Appointee 4 likewise indicated that he “learned a lot from reporters. They were really helpful. They had a vested interest; they wanted me to be helpful to them so they were very helpful in educating me about how the job is supposed to go.” And, in the words of Obama Appointee 2, “where we had the advantage was we had all the information they were trying to get at, so you could outmaneuver a reporter.”

The only appointee who did not believe that reporters generally at least sometimes possessed a knowledge advantage was Obama Appointee 5. “One of the things most surprising to me is I expected reporters covering this would be sophisticated on the issues, and of course there were a handful that were – usually the columnists or extremely well-respected magazines,” he explained. “But the day-to-day beat reporters I think we made mistakes sometimes in overestimating, when we should have explained things more. I was under the impression they knew more than they did and sometimes it surprised me that some knew absolutely nothing and it was like talking to a wall, which surprised me given the gravity of the issues we worked on.” This appointee indicated that this was the case even for reporters for some elite national outlets. Finally, Bush Appointee 5 likewise indicated that “a lot who cover the Treasury ... didn’t have detailed knowledge,” but he ultimately declined to answer the question because he said he could not understand how reporters would have an advantage since “they’re not trying to stump you.”

In general however, with minor exceptions, most appointees were willing to acknowledge that they were in a position, at least at times, of being the sources of information for people who clearly better understood their own policy portfolios. While several appointees downplayed the

disadvantage this situation placed them in, it nevertheless seems reasonable to anticipate that spokespeople who could go toe-to-toe with reporters on the substance of their issues would be better positioned to influence media coverage to the advantage of their administration.

By contrast, only one civil servant believed that the superior knowledge of reporters gave members of the press an advantage. While this civil servant had decades of experience as a government spokesperson, he did not have prior previous knowledge of his subject matter portfolio when he assumed his Treasury position and indicated that many of the trade reporters with whom he worked had decades of experience on the substance of his issues. A second civil servant indicated that while there are still a few reporters with superior knowledge, “there’s been a lot of turnover within the press corps ... [and] increasingly reporters covering us don’t have broad nor deep knowledge.” While this likely does point to changes in the media landscape, I suspected it also pointed to the benefits of the length of his tenure. Another civil servant indicated that there was not a problem because if he did not know how to answer a question he would do research and then get back to the reporter, but because he had decades of experience as a policy specialist in his subject matter portfolio, I doubted that lack of knowledge was an issue.

However, a majority of civil servants were clear that there was no knowledge differential whatsoever. Two civil servants were explicit that they simply knew as much or more than the reporters with whom they worked. In the words of Civil Servant 6, “I’ve been around for a while too ... especially, I think we all lived through [the financial crisis of] 2008 together and that’s an advantage; we all have a similar vocabulary. ... I’ve read a lot of books and talked to people who wrote them on the financial crisis, and think I’m keeping up okay. I’m old.” Another civil servant indicated that when it came to his portfolio, “this is one area where reporters do know their stuff;” however, he indicated that this still was not a problem: “the programs were so

complicated that I don't know they had an advantage." A different civil servant indicated that reporters likewise seemed to know too little, indicating that they have "blinders on" and he had to educate them about how his programs were different from the issues they typically covered.

Of course, it is possible that there is less of a knowledge differential between civil servants and reporters than between appointees and civil servants because the policy portfolios of civil servants are less important than those of appointees, and therefore mainstream reporters spend less time learning about and covering them. However, there are serious trade publications which closely monitor the Treasury bureaus, and civil servants would therefore be likely to bump up against this problem with such reporters. I therefore concluded that, overall, civil servants had greater knowledge of the policy portfolios for which they were responsible. This conclusion was corroborated by my interviews with reporters.

#### *Reporters on the Knowledge of Appointees vs. Civil Servants*

Reporters overwhelmingly indicated that, with few exceptions, appointees typically came to their jobs with inadequate knowledge of their policy portfolios. In the words of Reporter 2, "they generally do not come into their roles with a meaningful amount of background knowledge about either their topic or the beat reporters who cover them." Or, as Reporter 7 put it: "those first few months at Treasury when Obama came in, it was patently obvious that the folks working there, while some were very nice, had limited experience in the area." However, reporters consistently indicated that the better appointees could come up to speed rather quickly (Reporter 2 estimated that this could happen in as little as six months).

Most devastatingly, Reporter 4 complained that "you get at Treasury people whose careers have been working on political campaigns, and as best I can tell lack an ability to balance their own checkbooks and misunderstand the most basic aspects of the workings of financial

markets, and loudly insist things are true that aren't and make fools of themselves." He complained that "not infrequently it's the case that you find yourself in a position asking a question and needing to explain the question and why it's a question and what the possible answers to the question are and where they might obtain possible answers. It's more the case with appointees than with civil servants, although it happens with both, because they're intermediating between you and the experts, so questions that might make perfect sense to the end recipient need to be packaged and translated because you're playing a game of telephone and you need to work through an intermediary." However, he noted this problem may be more extreme at the Treasury than in other government agencies, because of the sheer complexity of the issues and the divorce of these issues from the knowledge of the average person; as Reporter 7 put it, "as is frequently the case, campaign workers ... haven't been reading up on the latest currency report or Fed regulations." Since most government agencies handle complex, technical issues, this may be an issue faced by other appointees, as well.

The sole exception to these complaints about the initial lack of knowledge of most appointees was Reporter 6, who unlike the other reporters interacted with Treasury public affairs officers only sporadically on stories for a major national publication, and reported that he had never found inadequate knowledge to be a problem because if public affairs officials were unfamiliar with a topic they were unafraid to say so and would indicate that they would get back to him.

Another common complaint of reporters about the knowledge of appointees was that they typically focused nearly exclusively on the politics of a situation. Reporter 1 explained that with appointees, it is "sometimes ... hard to get them to speak about things other than the politics of a situation, whereas I was usually trying to gather a broader picture." Reporter 3 explained that

appointees “usually see things through a prism of politics that isn’t always helpful to us as reporters or in some cases isn’t even pertinent to the subject matter.” Reporter 2 indicated that this is the case because “they tend to see ... economic and financial reporters through a similar prism through which they saw political reporters on a campaign trail and often do not realize that economic and financial reporters are completely different from political reporters and how they operate. ... You end up having people who talk past each other way too often.”

By contrast, only one reporter described a similar period of learning on the job by civil servants; in the words of Reporter 1, a veteran Treasury reporter, “I don’t think I ever encountered one who I didn’t think was up to the task right off the bat.” Reporters overwhelmingly described civil servants as having greater knowledge of their subject matter portfolios than appointees, stemming from their longevity in their jobs; according to Reporter 7 “the civil servants’ strength is typically that they understand the issues a lot better; they have a lot more context and knowledge.” Reporter 2 characterized civil servants as offering “incredible historical perspective, grounded dispassionate analysis, and ... incredible depth in their job.” Reporter 3 noted that civil servants are “more likely to be in it because they have an interest in the topic as opposed to being moved there after completing a political job, so I consider them for the most part better informed and also I would say probably because of that probably more effective.” The Federal Reserve Bank was often cited as an office with civil servants who served as particularly competent spokespeople. (While former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan was famous for his opaque language, *New York Times* columnist Douglas R. Holmes recently reported that “those days are long gone.”) (2014).

### **III. Response Times to Media Inquiries**

One of the most important qualities of a public affairs official is the ability to respond



quickly to reporters working on deadline. In recent years, as print reporters have begun to file their stories in real time online as opposed to meeting evening deadlines for the next day's paper, and cable news channels broadcast all day as opposed to facing set deadlines for the morning, noon and evening news, the importance of this quality has heightened. I therefore attempted to determine whether political appointees or civil servants are better at responding to reporters under deadline pressure.

I first asked both sets of officials how long it typically took them to respond to media inquiries. Appointees stressed that their response times depended upon the question, but two Obama appointees indicated that they could often respond within an hour, with more time required for some responses; one Obama appointee said he responded immediately to say he was working on the reporter's query, and afterwards the time required varied; and two Obama appointees said responses could take several hours, with one estimating five hours and another saying he got back to reporters within the day. Two Bush appointees likewise indicated they would respond within a half hour or right away to say they were working on the answer; Bush Appointee 5 responded "usually by their deadline;" and one Bush appointee said he responded immediately if he could and usually within 24 hours.

The response of one of the only two appointees who started as a spokesperson but later served in a higher-level Treasury public affairs post – and thus had a significantly longer tenure than average – illustrated clearly how policy knowledge is related to response times. This appointee indicated that when he started his job he would ask his colleagues what they recommended he say in response to media inquiries, but he thought this process, which he called "standard operating procedure," took too long. As he grew to intimately understand the policy substance of his portfolio, he was able to shift his approach. "So what I started doing very

quickly is, instead of saying ‘what are we saying?’ I would say, ‘here’s what I’m planning’ and I would write the talking points so I could have responses [to reporters] in an hour, I cut the time in half, and after a while [Treasury officials] trusted me to be able to just talk to reporters without having to go through the process of developing talking points.” Obviously the ability to do this requires a major level of policy sophistication.

Of course, it is not possible to draw firm comparisons from such an open-ended question, especially given the varying portfolios of the officials which by their nature somewhat dictate response times. For example, it is possible that civil servants receive more technocratic questions from reporters which by definition simply require more time in order to retrieve data. Nevertheless, civil servants seemed somewhat less likely than appointees to report that they could respond immediately to reporters. The exception was Civil Servant 5, who indicated that he could respond “off the cuff” and believed he got back to reporters faster than political appointees. Civil Servant 2 likewise said he could sometimes respond within 20 minutes if the question was easy, but more complicated questions could take “a day or two.” Civil Servant 4 tried to respond “within a few hours or a half day depending on complexity,” Civil Servant 1 said it could take several hours, Civil Servant 6 tried to respond in less than half a day, and Civil Servants 3 and 7 tried to get back to reporters the same day, but it could take until the next day.

In comparing the response times of the public affairs officials, it seems most accurate to rely on the assessments of reporters who interact with both appointees and civil servants. It seems reasonable to believe that the highly seasoned reporters who were the subjects of my interviews take the difficulty of obtaining information into account when judging the reasonableness of response times to their inquiries and apply the same set of standards when

judging the response times of appointees and civil servants. I therefore place particular value on their responses to the question of which group of officials responded to them more quickly.

### *Reporters on Response Times*

Civil servants were also somewhat – though certainly not vehemently or universally – perceived by reporters to be slower to respond to their inquiries. Reporter 7 was the sole reporter who found civil servants to be faster. He found this to be the case because appointees were defensive. Reporter 3 could not discern a difference in the speed of the two groups, while Reporter 4 found that while neither appointees nor civil servants were overall faster to respond as a group, “the one distinction is to the extent appointees see a political advantage in a particular story, they are the most helpful PR people.” Reporters 1, 2, 5, and 6 found appointees to be faster to respond to them, however Reporters 1 and 5 indicated that civil servants were also generally good at responding. Reporter 5, for example, indicated that the internal approval process delayed the responses of both groups, while the responses of appointees could be delayed “because they don’t know the issues.”

Reporter 2 was most critical of civil servants in this regard, arguing that civil servants “move at a snail’s pace compared to the realities of the media and political environment” and in some agencies “like the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Census and IRS, ... you wonder what kind of planet they’re on” and “you have to push the people who do this work a lot harder than you think you should have to,” while other civil servants, such as those at the Federal Reserve, were much faster.

However, reporters did not necessarily find the more rapid responses of appointees to be helpful. Like Reporter 4, Reporters 2 and 6 attributed the faster pace of appointees to their political motivations. Reporter 2 indicated that while appointees are “attuned to the fact that you

need things quickly and they don't want a story to get ahead of them," the information they actually provided was "not always that valuable." Similarly, Reporter 6 indicated that "for my purposes the politicals are more quotable, they're more accessible on a deadline basis to give a quote, they want to make sure their person or agency is represented in the story so in terms of the logistics of producing a piece of newspaper content on deadline, they're better by far." On the other hand, he said, in these faster responses, "it's hard to reach that level of trust where they really tell you what's happening as opposed to what they want you to think is happening or how they want you to interpret it."

Thus, while appointees overall appear to be somewhat faster to respond to the press, the differences in their response times was far from extreme. Furthermore, reporters indicated that they were often left unsatisfied with or skeptical of the actual responses of appointees even if they were faster, which indicates that their arguments were not influential with reporters, a factor which would have diminished the effectiveness of appointees.

#### **IV. Skill at Managing Negative Interactions with the Press**

I next measured the quality of the relationships that the public affairs officers enjoyed with the press. While disagreements would be expected in such positions, it would be critical for an effective public affairs officer to maintain collegial relationships and close contact with reporters in order to effectively influence media coverage on behalf of their administration. With the exception of Bush Appointee 5, who both refused to answer the question or to provide a reason for not answering it, political appointees generally described themselves as enjoying very good personal relationships with reporters and placing high value on the importance of such relationships. The appointees almost universally acknowledged that their exchanges with reporters rarely but nevertheless occasionally became heated, but they worked quickly to repair

relationships after such events. Bush Appointee 4 indicated that he was “embarrassed” after a screaming exchange with a reporter in front of other members of the Treasury press corps, and thought it was important that shortly afterwards the other members of the press saw him communicating civilly with this reporter. However, it was unmistakable that the appointees were willing to be forceful when they disagreed with a reporter. Obama Appointee 3 explained that his strategy when he was upset with a reporter was to “push back and push back and push back. If that story is never going to be corrected, with the next story you have leverage.” His definition of pushing back entailed “getting the Assistant Secretary on the phone and lawyers to explain why they’re fucking wrong and every question, replying with a voluminous response, making it a pain for him to write the story.”

The Obama appointees indicated that more aggressive measures were often taken at the behest of their bosses. For example, Obama Appointee 4 explained that “I think sometimes, particularly at Treasury, we were overzealous in wanting stories to be written a certain way, and I think 60 percent of the time it was reasonable asks and 40 percent of the time it was people above us trying to [do] a lot of posturing and a lot of making sure the boss is happy as opposed to, like, reasonable expectations.” When the Treasury was truly upset with a reporter, Obama Appointee 5 indicated, the Deputy Assistant Secretaries for Public Affairs “would sometimes blacklist, which is something I personally disagree with. They would stop inviting them to briefings. I think everyone ended up on the blacklist at some point, there were three spaces on the list and when one came off they’d find a way to get another on; it was kind of bizarre.”

Bush Appointee 1 indicated that relations with reporters became “increasingly combative” at the end of the Bush administration, because among the press there was a “[former

*Newsweek* investigative correspondent] Mike Ikikoff ‘I have a right to know’ attitude you had to deal with, ‘what are you not telling us,’ ‘why aren’t you doing more.’” He acknowledged that he:

had some serious screaming matches with reporters in some cases and cut reporters off sometimes. It wasn’t as blatant as I won’t take the call, I never did anything like that, I always returned calls, but you had reporters writing incorrect stories and not taking the time to learn their stuff [and] they became very dangerous to us because they were misreporting. They lost a lot of privileges they could have otherwise had: access to senior officials, my time. If you’re going to be irresponsible in your writing, which we’ve seen, I’m not going to waste my time with you, because you’re going to write bad stories anyways. I will help reporters who write responsibly. [That’s how I’ll] spend my time.

Like the appointees, the civil servants reported having good relationships with members of the press. One civil servant indicated that things had never gotten heated; reporters sometimes were frustrated if he did not immediately have information at his fingertips, but reporters tended to understand. Another indicated that things had only gotten heated once, when a reporter was requesting an unreasonable amount of information under FOIA, but he was able to sit down, discuss, and resolve the matter with the reporter.

Two civil servants indicated that on the rare occasions when things became heated, they were simply unhelpful with reporters. Civil Servant 2 explained that “the occasional reporter ... is not being transparent and usually I have a pretty good gut instinct and their frustration will rise because if I think they’re angling at something and not being transparent, I’ll be very factual, like, ‘Do you know what time it is?’ ‘Yes, I know what time it is.’ But I’m always very polite and professional.” Likewise, Civil Servant 6 reported simply being unhelpful with difficult reporters: “Someone wanted to interview a staffer and because she had not been particularly

friendly in the past, I referred her to a report on the web and said ‘that’s all you need, it’s all we’re offering.’ In our little world, that feels like a big deal, but that’s about as aggressive as it got, and I said to have her editor contact me if you disagree.”

However, Civil Servant 3, who had no previous press experience before his Treasury public affairs role, evinced a strikingly passive relationship to the press. He explained a damaging story written by a reporter for a major national newspaper who he considered to be “determined to make the facts fit his storyline. I got the subject matter expert on the conference call with him to explain it, and he still didn’t report it correctly. We ended up with a front page story ... we weren’t happy, but what could we do? We gave him a call to correct the information and he was determined he was going to have it his way, so what could we do? That’s all we could do, we just accepted it and moved on.” By contrast, it would be difficult to imagine a political appointee simply “accepting” a factually incorrect, high-profile story without elevating the situation to an editor or taking other punitive measures.

Of course, civil servants covered less high-profile and less political – and therefore by definition less contentious – issues to begin with, likely making for less contentious interactions with the press. And, as Civil Servants 2 and 5 noted, they could also get help from the Treasury public affairs appointees when they had issues with reporters. Nevertheless, it seemed clear from their divergent responses that political appointees worked significantly more actively and strategically on a day-to-day basis to attempt to influence media coverage while striking a balance that maintained their relationships with press. Civil servants, on the other hand, appeared from their responses to this question to engage significantly less in working to actively manipulate the stories and reporters with which they worked. This finding was clearly corroborated when I asked reporters what both groups of officials did when they were upset with

their coverage of a particular story.

### *Reporters on What Officials Do When Upset With Their Coverage*

When asked what happens when government officials are upset with their reporting, Reporters 1, 2, and 6 indicated that appointees are quick to complain, while civil servants will rarely do so. In the words of Reporter 1, appointees “tend to come quickly, by phone or in person, while the civil servants are a little less likely to come to you but will probably send the political person after you.” Reporter 2 likewise indicated that “appointees will respond aggressively and immediately” while “civil servants rarely do anything. Sometimes you’ll hear about it days or weeks later, in passing.” Reporter 6 concurred that “civil servants just tend to smolder and don’t say anything unless their bosses tell them to. Two weeks later, you find out they’re still pissed off at you for something you wrote that they never called you about.”

Reporters 3, 4, 5, and 7 said civil servants do sometimes complain, but in the words of Reporter 3, appointees do so “more frequently, more vociferously, [and] more aggressively.” Reporters 4 and 5 indicated that calls from civil servants tended to be about true factual errors, though Reporter 4 indicated that civil servants may also object to the tone and perspective of stories. Reporter 7 was most dramatic in his description of the complaints of civil servants, reporting that “both politicals and civil servants will try to shape your coverage, as is their job, by cajoling, wheedling, and complaining. That’s what you get paid to do.”

Reporter 5 drew a distinction between the Obama and Bush administrations, arguing that the Obama administration “was incredibly touchy, they would call and argue about adjectives. The Bush folks didn’t do that.”

A truly new phenomenon reporters described – which should perhaps be considered an



additional facet of the permanent campaign – is attempts by government spokespeople to actually edit articles written by reporters. While just a few years ago such attempts would have been impossible, articles are now often posted on the websites of news organizations before they appear in print in the next day’s paper. Public affairs officials monitor these websites closely, and when they are upset with a story they now attempt to convince reporters and editors to change them before the next day’s paper goes to print. Reporter 6 explained that there is now “a clear recognition that the story isn’t the story in immutable form. As soon as something is up on the web, if someone doesn’t like it or wants to shape it, they will fight for real-time change in the content or headline. It suggests to me a really high level of sensitivity and sophistication about how information works these days.”

Reporter 4 explained, “my wife still talks about this regular 11 pm call with the White House, where she could hear a voice angry with me, seeking changes and objecting to characterizations.” He argued that this strategy may actually be effective because “there is an opportunity that didn’t exist before for aggressive PR people to modify stories in that initial period before they’re final” and he indicated that as a result of such conversations he had made “significant” changes to his stories, especially but not only during the financial crisis.

Reporter 6 explained that his media organization tried to resist making such changes, in recognition of “the very slippery slope you’re on as soon as you start making changes, so unless there is a very clear, factual screw-up that would generate a correction in the next day’s paper, you really have to hold your guns or otherwise you’re on a merry-go-round that will never stop.”

However, reporters seemed unfazed by these complaints. They consistently indicated that they were open to having such conversations, even when they viewed complaints as unreasonable, and they did not report that such confrontations negatively impacted their

reporting on their sources in the future. Reporter 2 noted that sometimes the government spokespeople would punish reporters (“you get shut out of something later or certain people don’t talk to you again or you have icy relations for a while, and in every case it passes.”). Reporter 4 likewise noted that government spokespeople would “play games with access. If they’re mad, you’re less likely to get the next interview or leak. There’s a clear reason appointees in particular will allow themselves to get angry and yell: It does have an effect. No one likes getting yelled at, we need access, and we don’t want to get caught out in errors – so I think in some ways it’s effective, though it’s not optimal. ... It breeds resentment and hostility in the relationship and so it ... may ... curtail that tendency to write the negative, but it also curtails the upside, to embrace your side of the story.”

But aside from Reporter 4’s description of how such interactions iced relations with government spokespeople and made him less likely to write positive coverage, none of the reporters indicated that they themselves held grudges against spokespeople who complained and/or tried to edit their stories before final publication, even when they did so aggressively. The reporters indicated a willingness to correct their stories, if they were wrong. Reporter 3, who was one of the reporters generally most critical of government spokespeople, explained that “even if you’ve called me five straight days to complain about something I thought was stupid, I think it’s my responsibility on the sixth day to keep an open mind; maybe you’re right.”

Likewise, when I asked Reporter 5 if hostile reactions from spokespeople would impact his next story, he responded, “oh, no, it’s just part of the game.” Reporter 6 described a willingness “to forgive and forget on both sides. It’s not a war, it’s a battle. You fight it, you get over it, you move on.” Reporter 7 explained that such confrontations were inevitable because “there is no be all, end all truth when you’re dealing with policy.” Reporter 4 even seemed to like

it, explaining that when spokespeople were truly incensed they would “call bosses, email bosses, ... in extreme cases issue public statements explaining why the story was wrong – which I think is a healthy, good way to respond. ... My general response is it makes me feel like it must have been a pretty good story.”

In sum, then, although both civil servants and appointees were reported to sometimes complain and joust with reporters, it is clear that appointees took significantly more aggressive measures to attempt to alter the course of reporting that appeared to be headed in a direction which they perceived as disadvantageous – and even to “edit” stories once they were published. Of course, some of this difference clearly stems from the fact that they are responsible for more contentious policy issues to begin with. Nevertheless, as the recent allegations into IRS misconduct (which shall later be discussed) indicate, civil servants are certainly not immune from handling negative stories. The fact that most reporters were adamant that the complaints and other aggressive tactics of appointees were par for the course and did not have a lasting impact on their relationships or coverage indicates that, to the degree that appointees are successful in altering coverage through the tactics they pursue, the changes clearly redound to the benefit of the administration – indicating that political appointees are simply more effective in this regard.

## **V. Skill at Influencing Media Coverage**

I next attempted to measure the overall influence that both groups exerted over both the topics that reporters cover and the tone and content of media reports which they attempted to influence.

Asked how much influence they had over the topics reporters covered, four out of five Obama appointees believed they had little influence because reporters covered the “news of the

day.” As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6, the Obama appointees generally indicated that their massive workloads precluded them from proactively pitching stories. Obama Appointee 4 explained that his portfolio “was so broad that ... there were all kinds of things that you could focus on, that oftentimes it was overwhelming plus we rarely even got to do any of the proactive stuff on this because so much of what I dealt with was incoming questions from reporters.” Obama Appointee 5 concurred that “this is probably a shortfall of the department – there was very little time spent thinking about proactive stories,” because the amount of incoming inquiries he received was sometimes so great that there were “times where it felt like I couldn’t breathe because I couldn’t figure out what to do next.” Obama Appointee 1 also indicated that “we didn’t do enough pitching,” in part because “you’re trying to keep your head above water in that job.” Obama Appointee 2 explained, “a lot of it was so reactive ... there’s just so much incoming.” Obama Appointee 3 explained, “I played a lot of defense” and reported that “I literally had no time.”

Obama Appointee 1 indicated that “we were more reactive than proactive in terms of topics, or [reporters] were driven by the calendar” and reported on scheduled events, such as mandated releases of reports or international meetings. However, he argued that this was also in some ways a function of being a government agency responsible for the “wheels of government;” it was the job of the White House to drive the “message of the day.” Obama Appointee 5 indicated that “whatever was happening that day was the topic we were all talking about.” Of course, often the news of the day *was* what the Treasury was doing, so in this sense the Obama appointees may be considered to have had more influence than that for which they gave themselves credit. Obama Appointee 3 was the sole Obama official to report having “a lot” of influence “because I held the keys; [reporters] had to talk to me.”

By contrast, the Bush appointees were significantly more likely to report exerting influence over the topics reporters covered. Bush Appointee 1 described his influence as “moderate to strong;” Bush Appointee 3 indicated that much of what reporters wrote was influenced by the Secretary’s agenda; Bush Appointee 4 indicated that “we were able to drive a lot of stories . . .not that it was easy to do.” All four of these Bush appointees reported that their influence over topics stemmed at least in part from pitching stories or creating events that would drive coverage, with Bush Appointee 1 describing aggressive efforts to pitch stories and Bush Appointee 4 indicating that he was willing to engage in “banging a spoon on a highchair” if that is what it took to get attention. Bush Appointee 5 could not remember how much influence he had over reporters’ topics.

Thus, it appears that, overall, the Bush appointees were more likely to engage in proactive pitching, while the Obama appointees did so in a more limited fashion. A possible explanation for the differential between the Bush and Obama appointees is that many of the Bush appointees served at least in part prior to the 2008 financial crisis, which was likely a more pacific time at the Treasury than not only the crisis period but also the present, as the U.S. economy remains fragile. This could have given them greater time to engage in such proactive tactics. The fact that the Obama appointees realized and explained that they did not engage in as much pitching as they would have liked indicates that they likely would have done so under calmer circumstances – suggesting that appointees may overall have a greater propensity to attempt to proactively influence the topics of media reports, but also that their massive workloads may result in an effectiveness disadvantage in this regard.

Civil Servants overall reported exercising a moderate degree of influence over reporters’ topics. Civil Servant 3 indicated that he exerted no influence over reporters’ topics; Civil

Servants 4 and 6 indicated that reporters tended to cover their announcements; Civil Servants 1 and 2 said they were able to make suggestions which influenced reporters' topics when reporters called regarding stories; Civil Servant 5 said he was able to pitch smaller outlets but had limited influence over national reporters; and Civil Servant 7 likewise indicated success at pitching stories to the press. Nevertheless, it was striking that only two of the seven civil servants reported pitching stories.

If they considered themselves to have little influence over topics, the Obama appointees nevertheless reported significantly shaping the tone and content of stories they attempted to influence. Obama Appointee 1 reported a "pretty fair amount" of influence; Obama Appointee 2 reported "a lot;" Obama Appointee 4 reported "a significant amount;" and Obama Appointee 5 reported that he "was able to do that pretty effectively." Obama Appointees 1, 4, and 5 indicated that they achieved this influence through making their cases persuasively to reporters. The exception was Obama Appointee 3, who indicated that "content you can mess with, but tone is basically your relationship with that reporter [and] how they normally write anyway. Tone is hard because unless it's inaccurate, if you complain, they don't give a fuck."

The Bush appointees reported a perhaps somewhat smaller degree of influence, which in part seemed to stem from their belief that the press was sometimes against them. Bush Appointee 2 said the administration had moderate influence over more controversial topics because "we were just always playing against a narrative that was against us" and fairly strong influence over other topics. Bush Appointee 1 echoed this belief, indicating that he had a "moderate" degree of influence but "a lot of times it depends on the attitude the reporter came in with." Bush Appointee 3 reported that some of their influence stemmed from the fact that reporters traveled with and grew to like his principal; "we were kind of close." Bush Appointee 4 reported having

influence stemming from relationships with reporters in which he tried to educate them on topics he wanted them to cover, as well as influence stemming “less [from] messaging than having really strong facts you can show and present in a quick way, but that’s really hard to do.” Bush Appointee 5 could not remember.

Civil Servant 5 covered a topic so controversial that he reported having little influence over tone and content, despite the fact that I judged from his other responses that he conducted his work with sophistication. The other civil servants all reported exerting some influence, although they often explained that they exercised this influence once a reporter had already decided to pursue a story and reached out to them. They exercised this influence through relationships (Civil Servants 2 and 4), offering access and information (Civil Servants 2 and 7), very occasionally convincing a reporter to shift the focus of his or her story to something more “interesting” (Civil Servant 3), or occasionally recommending third party validators (Civil Servant 6). However, Civil Servant 6 indicated that “often I don’t think it’s really necessary because of the line of business we’re in; most of this stuff is straightforward and factual and matters of tone aren’t all that important.”

Interestingly, Civil Servant 1 indicated that providing such factual information was actually a source of influence, indicating “reporters appreciate ... when they call you up and you’re very straightforward and get a subject matter expert on the phone within a couple of hours; I think that has a positive influence on tone and content.” He indicated that when appointees got involved in their stories, it tended to be to the detriment of the story, because “they typically don’t want to say anything and I think that influences tone and content.” This issue shall be further discussed in section 8.

While the responses of civil servants certainly indicated that they engaged in good

practices, it seemed clear that appointees were in the business of actively attempting to promulgate their arguments to a much greater degree than civil servants – even if, in the case of the Obama appointees, they largely promulgated their messages in responses to topics reporters were already covering or, in the case of the Bush appointees, they believed that the impact of their arguments was somewhat hampered by a liberal media bias. Of course, this is somewhat to be expected given the more polemical nature of their portfolios. This finding was corroborated by the responses of reporters.

#### *Reporters on Who Influences Their Topics and the Tone and Content of their Coverage*

Interestingly, Reporters 3, 4, and 6 explained that they were rarely pitched stories from either group of government officials. Reporter 4 explained, “I don’t think public affairs people do a very good job of being proactive ... they’re almost wholly reactive and it’s very unusual for them to try to influence the selection of topics from the outside.” This is especially significant given the perception of appointees as aggressively attempting to shape media coverage on behalf of the president.

However, most reporters indicated that appointees attempted to exert greater influence over their stories overall. For example, Reporter 5 indicated that “I probably would be surprised if I got a pitch from a civil servant, just because they don’t do too much of that. In my experience, it’s been initiated by the appointees.” Appointee 3 concurred that “appointees are far more likely to push harder to try to influence a story than non-politicals,” while Reporter 2 indicated that “appointees more frequently influence the topics [he covers] because they’re trying to push a particular line or push back against a particular line of thinking” while civil servants “tend not to have a lot of tone in what they do.” Reporter 4 likewise indicated that civil servants are “not trying to manage you to the same extent or get at a particular goal and when they do



they're not as good, so they have less influence over tone and content." In this sense, appointees also had an advantage because of their political access; Reporter 1 indicated that when an appointee pitched a story he "knew that's what the Secretary wanted discussed."

Reporter 1 indicated that appointees were "undoubtedly better at making arguments," while Reporter 4 concurred that "appointees tend to be better at pursuing a particular objective in shaping a story, arguing for their own understanding of the facts," but he also noted that they sometimes do so in such an aggressive manner that their efforts become counterproductive, because, as will be discussed in the next section, it makes him apply greater skepticism to their claims.

Appointees were also said to have a keener sense of what was most newsworthy. According to Reporter 2, "if you rely on civil servants for your topics, you'll end up with a lot of boring topics." Meanwhile, according to him, appointees "tend to be more attuned to what people are actually discussing as the hot issue of the day, because they're not drowning in decades of background."

However, most reporters (Reporters 1, 3, 4, and 6) were clear that appointees were often not successful in shaping the tone and content of their stories because their attempts to do so were so aggressive and overtly political that, in the words of Reporter 3, their efforts "can backfire" and cause reporters to become skeptical. The next section will explore this issue in greater detail.

Thus, it seems clear that, unsurprisingly, appointees work harder to influence media coverage and promulgate their preferred narratives. However, their efforts are often ineffective because they lack credibility with reporters, as the next section will explore. Civil servants, on the other hand, made less of an effort to pitch stories altogether, indicating that they are relatively

ineffective in shaping the topics of coverage. The argument of Reporter 4 that civil servants are not good at influencing stories when they try to manage them suggests that they may also not be effective in shaping the tone of stories. However, the next section makes clear that civil servants enjoy a credibility advantage which likely translates into an efficacy advantage in influencing the *content* of the stories they work on with reporters, because the information they provide is viewed by the press as less biased than that of their appointee counterparts.

## **VI. Credibility with Reporters**

To determine how the efforts of appointees and civil servants ultimately impact the coverage of reporters, I asked the reporters whether they find themselves more skeptical regarding the claims made by public affairs officers who are political appointees or civil servants. In one of the clearest and most consistent findings to emerge from my interviews, reporters indicated, without exception, that they discount the claims of political appointees, because they believe that the *raison d'être* of political staff is to make the president look good. They indicated this to be the case not just in response to this specific question, but also repeatedly throughout the course of our conversations.

Reporters were unequivocal that they judge appointees to have less credibility than their careerist counterparts, simply by virtue of the positions they hold. Accordingly, appointees begin every conversation and interaction with reporters at a disadvantage, because they are assumed from the start to have political motives – making it more difficult for them to promulgate the information and messages they seek to convey. Here are reporters in their own words:

*“As you can imagine, for reporters, when we recognize that we’re being kind of sold a story by the political appointees, we tend to take the opposite side because we’re thinking, what are they*

*up to, what's going on here? If it was a good, logical argument why some particular tax issue or something was about to become a highlight of political discussion, yeah, that was fine, you would have that discussion, but you were always a little suspicious. Maybe suspicious is overstating it, but you always tried to determine whether there was some other side to the story when a political offered it to you. With civil servants, no."*

- Reporter 1

*"The arguments of civil servants almost always carry greater credibility than the arguments of appointees, because we tend to view civil servants as people who have worked across administrations and who will probably work in other administrations, and they want to maintain some semblance of consistency on how they approach these issues... I'm more skeptical of appointees for sure because they have more pressure on them and they are more concerned about the political implications, and as a result they're more likely to be selective in what kind of information they provide and may not always give you the full picture of what you're pursuing."*

-Reporter 2

*"If I get a call from someone at Treasury pushing a narrative that the Secretary was very influential in doing X, Y or Z, I don't know how effective that is, because I'm instantly wary they're spinning. That doesn't mean it's not true. It could be both and worth writing, but I'm instantly wary because I know it's almost inconceivable an appointee would pitch a story or try to get me to incorporate some angle that didn't clearly have a benefit to the boss. They wouldn't suggest a story because they thought it was interesting or good journalism; they're not thinking that way."*

-Reporter 3

*“I’m definitely more skeptical of information put out by appointees. They’re political appointees, they have it basically as their job to have a commitment to the president or to the administration who appointed them, whereas the civil servant probably sees himself or herself as having more of a commitment to the U.S. taxpayer, or the government as a whole, or to the country...”*

-Reporter 3

*“I think it’s true that appointees view themselves as in the service of a political party or of the individual who appointed them or the administration they serve ... they see stories through the framework of political advantage, so that informs the things they are and aren’t willing to tell you ... It’s my view that the role and responsibility of public affairs officers is to make information available to the public, and it’s my strong sense that they don’t share that perspective about their job.”*

-Reporter 4

*“Appointees tend to be better at pursuing particular objectives in shaping a story, ... but ... they don’t necessarily serve their own interests by doing so as aggressively as they do because the aggressive effort to sell the story can and does lead you to doubt the merits of your story or make sure you’re telling the other side or push back on what you’re told, and, one, that frustration can influence the tone and content, and, two, it undermines their credibility. The facts presented you view through a little more of a jaundiced eye and wonder whether they’re true and it leads you to do a little more due diligence on whether you’re getting the full and complete version of the answer to the question you asked.”*

-Reporter 4

*“It’s the government, these guys are spending three trillion dollars a year and it’s a democracy, so they’re answerable to the public and public opinion, so therefore they will always try to tailor their message. It’s like a car company trying to sell cars, they’re selling a service which is government service, so they’re going to tailor it to whatever the view of politics is just because this town is run by people who get elected, so therefore that’s a driving force in what they think and their worldview. No one elects the Treasury Secretary, but they elect the President, and the Secretary works for the President, and the President has to face re-election...”*

-Reporter 5

*“Appointees make arguments and they are heavily discounted because they’re advocates, they’re coming from a point of view and their prime objective is to defend the perspective of the person who appointed them at the expense of all other perspectives and other facts and what’s a fair rendering of a set of circumstances.”*

-Reporter 6

*“I try to take the posture that I’m not giving more or less weight to what any person says, but there’s just a natural hesitancy to give much weight to what appointees say just because you know they’re coming from that advocacy perspective and there’s an ulterior motive in everything they do.”*

-Reporter 6

*“The U.S. may have had more influence there [in Europe, during the sovereign debt crisis] than we reflected in stories, because we thought it was a load of heap.”*

-Reporter 6

*“You’re probably a little more skeptical of something coming out of Treasury’s Office of Public Affairs [which is staffed by appointees] than something like the OCC Public Affairs office [the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency’s public affairs office is staffed by civil servants] because they don’t have the political pressures or don’t see the same political pressures that an Undersecretary of Public Affairs sees or imagines.”*

-Reporter 7 (For the record: the title of the Treasury’s top appointee for public affairs is Assistant Secretary, not Undersecretary.)

However, one reporter indicated that this suspicion decreased over time, while another reporter indicated that it increased, indicating that appointees are at least able to influence the degree of reporters’ skepticism through their individual actions. Additionally, Reporter 4 noted that sometimes the narratives the appointees sought to promulgate were helpful, because “I am in the business of telling stories and it can be useful to deal with people in the storytelling business, because they have an awareness of what is or isn’t useful, or an adversarial relationship can force you to think more clearly about the conclusions you’re reaching.”

Furthermore, multiple reporters noted that civil servants themselves may be concerned with protecting their offices; in the words of Reporter 5, “even though they can’t be fired, everyone wants to please the boss and do well in these organizations.” On the other hand, Reporter 4 noted that “some [civil servants] appear genuinely committed to increasing public understanding,” using as an example a Securities and Exchange Commission press officer whose main goal appeared to be expanding knowledge of the office’s function and activities as opposed to putting his office in a position of advantage in every story – which Reporter 4 argued was an effective long-term strategy for building media influence.

To be sure, it is clear that the arguments of civil servants do not escape the scrutiny of reporters. However, the responses above indicate that most reporters assume that appointees have particular political motives in everything they do and are *almost always* trying to spin for their bosses. As a result, in the words of Reporter 6, the arguments of appointees are “heavily discounted” and met with a level of suspicion that significantly exceeds that which reporters apply to the information they receive from civil servants. This low level of credibility that appointees hold in the eyes of the press can only serve to handicap their ability to serve as effective advocates for the president – giving them a significant effectiveness disadvantage.

## **VII. Skill At Providing Requested Information to Reporters**

Next, I consider how reporters described their ability to access the information they sought for their stories from both appointees and civil servants. While it would certainly be in an administration’s interests to sometimes withhold information from the press, effective public relations officers would be expected to generally provide reporters with helpful information for their stories. Otherwise, they would damage their relationships with the press and cede control of the message to the other sources to whom reporters would turn.

### *Appointees*

Although appointees were perceived as knowing more about what was happening in the upper echelons of the Treasury, every reporter with whom I spoke vociferously argued that political appointees fail to give them the requisite background and context to shape their reporting. This complaint was emphatically made by every reporter with whom I spoke, despite the fact that I did not ask a direct question on the subject. The reporters indicated that they needed more conversations that were either on background (meaning that sources are not named

directly but rather referred to by agreed descriptions such as “Treasury official” or “administration official”) or off-the-record in order to explain issues, what might be happening in the future, and perhaps even discuss areas of disagreement. This situation was contrasted sharply by the majority of reporters with the Bush administration, in which Treasury officials were described as significantly more willing to engage in such discussions than the Obama appointees.

Reporter 2 reported that “in this administration versus others, there is ... less fruitful conversation on the front end to shape stories and thinking than there is in other administrations where you’re just kind of talking back and forth. In this administration, not just at Treasury but at numerous economic agencies, it may be the case that there is an administration-wide cultural approach to not risking information getting out, not volunteering information.” Reporter 3 concurred that:

the current administration is way too closed, way too afraid to walk, way too reluctant to even sort of give basic information. ... One of the problems with having a lot of appointees is that it’s harder for them to see and really get their head around, like, if I call and say can I talk to someone in the TARP [Troubled Asset Relief Program] office about TARP, they’re just afraid to do that. They’re afraid the guy or woman isn’t political, they don’t know if they’ll say something they don’t want to say, and I’m not going into the political, I’m just trying to get information, I just want a briefing from someone who can explain how it works. They’re just afraid, they figure, ‘what do we have to gain, the person talking could fuck it up.’

Similarly, Reporter 5, a veteran Treasury reporter, explained that “we cover very



complicated issues, so so many of our questions are just, ‘can you help me understand this, how does this particular thing work,’ and the political often feel constrained to be so on message with whatever the political point is that they’re either unwilling to go off the talking points just to help us understand an issue or they don’t know, just because they don’t know the issue themselves.” Reporter 7 indicated that, in contrast to other federal economic agencies who will “acknowledge the other side of an issue or the other arguments and explain them,” the Treasury responds to critical questions “in like a combative way.”

Two reporters speculated that this caution stemmed from the trauma of Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner’s widely-perceived-as-poor performance and lack of clarity announcing a plan to stem the country’s financial crisis on February 10, 2009, which caused the Dow Jones Industrial Average to immediately tank, dropping by about 300 points. “They got a little gun shy after that,” Reporter 3 said. Reporter 5 also attributed the diminished access afforded to reporters by appointees in the Obama administration to differences in the styles of their principals. “Paulson and Geithner were different; Geithner because he had been staff [civil service] at Treasury saw things in a different way than Paulson, who hadn’t served in government. Paulson was used to running Goldman, so if you wanted to talk, he talked – and he was rather forceful.”

By contrast, Reporter 5 indicated that, to get information from this administration, he needed to engage in “hostage taking.” “It’s often how this administration seems to run,” he said. “If you get a fact they may be willing to talk to you, but you’ve got to get it from a lobbyist or an opposing political party on the Hill and then present it to them as your hostage.” The reporter used an example of a story I was involved in, when Geithner made a short trip to Europe in September 2011 without press, in order to discuss the region’s sovereign debt crisis with

European finance ministers. When the Austrian Finance Minister made remarks critical of Geithner at the meeting, the reporter said, “she was our hostage” because it forced the Treasury to reach out to him to provide the U.S. version of events.

Reporters indicated that this approach left them “constantly puzzled” (Reporter 4). “It’s just a very, very, very cautious way of going about the exercise of public affairs, and it’s just hard to see how it’s effective.” (Reporter 3). This is because, for reporters, one of the best ways for a source to influence their reporting is by providing them with access. When asked about the savvy things that federal economic agencies do in order to shape the coverage they receive in the press, the majority of reporters indicated that providing access was the smartest thing they could do (an argument which, as shall later be discussed, is also, of course, self-serving). The reporters consistently argued that the lack of access provided by Obama appointees made the appointees less effective advocates for the administration, because they voluntarily forfeited opportunities to include their facts and point of view in stories and to shape the thinking of reporters. For example, Reporter 5 explained that one story he wrote which the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs had complained about resulted from the fact that he was not being provided with sufficient information from the Treasury on an overseas trip and therefore had to look elsewhere to come up with something to satisfy his editors’ demand for stories.

Reporter 7 likewise explained that “if there’s an issue ... you know is going to come up, giving reporters early access to not only lay out the issue but lay out the agency’s or department’s approach to it is invaluable, because reporters innately when tackling a topic will defer to that approach, so if you explain an issue to a reporter from your point of view before anyone else, they will default in a time crunch, and from then on approach the issue with that in mind ... It’s amazing how easy it is to shape reporters’ perceptions.”

Reporter 3 argued that the lack of information and access he receives from the Obama appointees makes it harder for him to write positive stories about the administration.

Additionally, he explained, “one advantage to giving journalists interviews and access is that it’s harder to write scathing pieces about people you’ve gotten to know. It’s easier to be more critical of someone a group you’ve never sat down with. It’s just human nature.”

Two reporters emphasized that the current appointees have foregone opportunities to build strong relationships with members of the press which foster trust and influence. One reporter contrasted this approach with that of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, which held a “reporter day” to allow the press to engage with officials, made its principals available for lunches and background conversations regularly, and worked to educate reporters about their work. “They built these relationships under less stressful circumstances, and then when they needed those relationships [during the financial crisis] they were able to draw on them,” he said. “There’s this fear of being burned by talking to a reporter and I understand it, but the benefits get overlooked.”

Reporters 3 and 5 were perhaps most critical of the performance of Treasury appointees in this regard, because they argued that this lack of access reflects a fundamental incompetence on the part of public affairs staff. For example, Reporter 3 used the example of the Treasury’s December 9, 2013 announcement that it had sold its final shares in General Motors, which were purchased during the financial crisis in order to stabilize the country’s automobile industry, as an example of a “lack of savvy and lack of experience” among its public affairs staff:

They announce an hour beforehand a conference call with [Treasury Secretary] Lew and senior officials on background late in the day. Here’s, this is where they undoubtedly

have a good story to tell and almost nobody is on the other side of this now saying it was a huge failure, people say the people lost \$10 million, but for the most part opposition to the auto bailout has dissipated or been beaten into submission, it's a good story to have to tell and they know it and want to tell it, but they don't know how to tell it, so they do a call with Lew, make a big announcement, and there's no visual, there's no photos, it's a call, there's no 'there,' there's no physical place, there's no press conference, there's just a call. Someone has to explain to me how that's effective, even if your motivations are purely political. They're not doing a good job of even representing themselves, often. They aren't good at explaining when they have a good story to tell.

Of course, such event creation has long been understood by sophisticated public relations professionals; Daniel Boorstin defined the "pseudo-event" as a human creation which, in contrast to a "train wreck or an earthquake ... is planned primarily ... for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. Therefore, its occurrence is arranged for the convenience of the reporting or reproducing media." (1992, 11).

Reporter 5 likewise indicated that the story in which he used the Austrian finance minister as a hostage was an example of a time when appointees were "kind of being inept." "Someone should have told the Secretary that others will talk and you'll be interpreted through others' voices," he said.

Both Reporter 3 and Reporter 5 blamed the fact that appointees often failed to provide access in a strategic way on their lack of journalism experience. "You can't have an entire office of people dealing with the media who have never worked in the media," Reporter 3 said. "It's illogical. The lack of experience shows. You can see it in their inability to pitch stories or even

time them appropriately.”

Reporter 7 attributed the lack of access to several things: “Some of it’s arrogance. Some of it is the unfair treatment they’ve received. And some stems from the knowledge gap [of appointees on the issues they cover.]”

For Reporter 5, this lack of access isn’t just aggravating to reporters and counterproductive for appointees. It also poses a problem for democracy. “Oftentimes what we see as the public’s right to know bumps up against the view of appointees of what is good for their bosses,” he said. “Therefore, they’re ... trying to either manage the message or limit whatever information they’ll let out. That’s a constant conflict.”

### *Civil Servants*

Just as appointees were perceived by reporters to not be forthcoming with the political information to which they had greater access, reporters indicated that civil servants likewise did not wield their greater policy knowledge to effectively influence reporting. “They’re ... very reluctant on the record but I was always struck by how much, even off-the-record, civil servants are reluctant to shoot the shit,” Reporter 2 said. For Reporter 1, civil servants are often “unclear or suspicious, I think, of what reporters’ intents are, so I would have to spend quite some time trying to explain that ‘I’m not trying to get you to say something that will get you in trouble.’”

Reporters 3, 5, and 6 argued that this is the case because civil servant spokespeople are often not authorized or empowered to speak to press a great deal. “It’s the political people who have been authorized to talk more, so you’re probably having a longer conversation with them,” Reporter 5 said. Civil servants “know the issues, but often – this whole town has gotten so much over the years about message control that they often feel that there’s just no benefit in talking to reporters because the only thing that will happen to them is they’ll get in trouble, so they can feel

constrained.” Reporter 5 did, however, indicate that “the ones who’ve been around a while and know how things work are usually more forthcoming.”

Meanwhile, Reporter 2 complained that civil servants sometimes fail to grasp how their subject matter connects to the stories reporters are writing. According to Reporter 4, civil servants “tend to just be less invested in the political consequences of a story, which sometimes means they lack the incentive to talk to you, but sometimes means they lack the disincentive.” Reporter 4 found civil servants to be generally less savvy than appointees in dealing with the media, reporting that “to the extent civil servants felt the need to defend their agency, they’re generally not very good at it.”

Reporter 6 concurred that civil servants seem less interested in attempting to influence reporting altogether. “I think they view themselves as facilitators only ... I don’t think they care about the outcome always, they view the request as an intrusion on their day as opposed to being their job. But they tend to be in much more of a neutral posture with questions, where they realize they’re dealing with facts and data and one of their jobs is to get it out to you, so if you’re calling about stuff like that, they tend to be a bit more useful. At the Bureau of Labor Statistics or Census, they’re good with data. If you ask them if you’re drawing the right conclusions, or crunching data and you call them up and say you’re having trouble extracting this, they’ll put it together, and a day later, it’s in your inbox. That’s what they’re trained to do and they’re really good.” Reporter 2 likewise found civil servants to provide better informational content.

Thus, reporters indicated that civil servants might sometimes be helpful at providing raw data, with the exception of Reporter 4 (who indicated that civil servants might sometimes not be politically motivated enough to have disincentives to providing information). However, reporters generally indicated that civil servants were, like their appointee counterparts, cautious and

unhelpful about providing the context, backgrounds, and explanations that they sought for their reporting. Of course, this could partly be the case because appointees prevented the civil servants from sharing such information; as will be discussed in the next section, Civil Servant 5 was adamant that if a civil servant was speaking on the record and sharing information of which the administration did not approve, the administration would stop the civil servant from speaking.

Of course, these complaints of reporters must likewise be discounted, at least to a degree, given the natural tension inherent in their jobs. As Reporter 5 explained, “we’re paid to find out things and tell our readers about them.” Obviously, reporters will always advocate for greater access to information.

The fact that reporters consistently argued that the Bush administration provided better access, however, does call for consideration of the possibility that the Obama appointees are less skilled or are withholding more information than the Bush administration. Of course, this narrative is particularly self-serving for reporters because it suggests that the current administration’s practices are abnormal and improper, and should thus be changed. However, the consistency with which this allegation was volunteered to me by reporters made it evident that the matter merited consideration. It will be discussed in detail in chapter 6.

Overall, however, while it would certainly not be in the interests of the administration to grant the completely free and open level of access that reporters desire, at the same time, it seems reasonably clear that both appointees and civil servants are missing opportunities to exert influence by providing explanations – even off-the-record – that might inculcate their worldview and strengthen their relationship with reporters. In this regard, neither group holds an effectiveness advantage. This finding is particularly striking in the case of the appointees, who, as we have seen, overall exerted significantly greater efforts to attempt to shape media coverage.

Nevertheless, reporters universally and consistently indicated that they were unable to access information from the appointees which, they argued, would have allowed them to better convey the administration's perspective on key issues.

### **VIII. Who Appointees and Civil Servants Perceive to be More Effective Administration**

#### **Advocates**

For additional insight into the question of whether appointees or civil servants are more effective advocates for the president in Treasury public affairs positions, I asked both the appointees and civil servants which group they thought was more effective at conveying the administration's messages in the press. Perhaps unsurprisingly, appointees overwhelmingly (but not universally) believed they were more effective, while civil servants overwhelmingly (but not universally) believed they were most effective.

Appointees indicated they were more successful because civil servants do not "understand the broader political architecture" (Obama Appointee 1), while "a big part of succeeding in government is political instinct. With reporters, we're good at reading situations very quickly, and that's something careers don't have any of, zero, and it's not just careers, there are some Assistant Secretaries at Treasury who aren't political and lack that quick instinct that will help you to be effective" – a skill that appointees offer their principals (Obama Appointee 5). Additionally, appointees "may be more invested and more concerned with how the administration is portrayed (Obama Appointee 2) because they "truly believe in the president, administration and people they're working for" (Bush Appointee 1), and "you can be more of an effective advocate because you're on the same side" (Bush Appointee 2), while the priorities of civil servants "are not the same as the appointees' priorities." (Obama Appointee 4). However, Bush Appointee 3 noted that appointees enjoy better access, while civil servants are "kind of



behind the scenes ... just by design.”

Bush Appointee 4 likewise explained that it is necessary for appointees to serve as spokespeople because policies change under different administrations:

You can't forget that the administration, the executive branch is a political body. The departments and agencies are not independent. They serve at the pleasure of the president. It matters who the president is. You're part of an administration and the policy. I don't believe a spokesperson can be credible who on a dime on January 20 at noon can go from being the voice of one policy and then at 12:01 go to being the voice of the opposite policy. That's just not credible, and to me the most important characteristic of a really effective spokesperson is credibility.

Obama Appointee 5 also noted that “it's nothing against civil servants, but there's limits on what a civil servant can do. They can't work the same hours as we do ... whereas a political person has come up through the political ranks, so you're just used to working round the clock, dealing with high level principals, talking to them succinctly ... You're battle tested coming through the political machine.” Bush Appointee 1 likewise argued that appointees “know we're here a short time, we're hungry, so many came off the campaign so you're used to working round the clock, so ... you go.”

The exception among appointees was Obama Appointee 3, who thought that “people underestimate career folks” who enjoy “subject matter expertise; they've seen stories before on particular subjects. They may not be as savvy media wise, but in a lot of cases that's not true. People really underestimate them.” Bush Appointee 5 said he did not know who was more

effective.

By contrast, civil servants generally argued that they conveyed the administration's messages in the press more effectively than appointees. Civil Servant 5 disagreed with Bush Appointee 4's claim that civil servants cannot credibly speak to political matters. He argued that "to the average mom or dad, they identify more with the agency and federal government than with the administration ... Within the beltway and among reporters, they assume if you're speaking for the agency and have clearance to do so, you are speaking for the administration ... if you're in a political agency, you're doing and saying what the political want or they will stop you from speaking."

Civil Servant 6 likewise pushed back on the conventional wisdom that civil servants are politically tone-deaf. He argued that "civil servants are almost always at least partially supervised by a political communicator ... and as a civil servant, I'm sensitive to what the political spokespeople are concerned about and certainly make an effort not to screw things up and get people pissed at me."

Civil servants also argued that their greater efficacy stemmed from their greater experience. While Civil Servant 3 did not feel comfortable pronouncing which group was ultimately more effective because the two groups worked well together, he indicated that he thought "appointees are at a disadvantage if [their subject matter portfolio] wasn't a particular focus in college, grad school, or somewhere they worked." Civil Servant 1 likewise explained that "civil servants often have twenty years plus working in an organization, which doesn't necessarily make them wonderful, but a lot of times you're looking at people that have incredible background." By contrast, he explained,

There is a bumper sticker that says ‘hire a teen while they still know everything.’ In many ways, I see politicals like that. A lot of them are very young with very little experience and they think they know everything. They’re coming from a campaign mode, so they think in terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ but you have to be one or the other, and that’s why if you express doubts of something ... you’re probably perceived as being ‘them,’ and they wouldn’t trust you, which would mean they would do everything they could to take you out of the loop completely, ‘cause that’s the way they work. And I’m just not sure how you get to a political and say, ‘no, that’s not how it works, 80 percent of people in the world are not interested in politics at all. They’re here trying to do a good job. They’re not trying to make the administration look bad; if they do their job well, then your administration will look well.’ Most people I work with want the current administration to look good because it reflects on them. So if people are saying the government is doing a good job, we’re happy because it means we’re doing a good job.

Civil Servant 1 also argued that the proclivity of appointees to cover up information was actually damaging to the administrations they served:

Appointees have a separate motivation, let’s put it that way, and there really isn’t any difference in the Obama administration than in the Bush administration. Politicals hate, absolutely hate, to take responsibility for anything. ‘Oh my god, you mean something went wrong and it was our fault?’ My thought is always, hey, when you start out you’re not trying to do the wrong thing, you had a set of reasons for making a decision, it didn’t go the way you wanted, to me the appropriate response is why you made the decision and what you’ll do now, and if you approach it that way it’s a reasonable approach and both

the media and the public would look at it and say it's reasonable. Instead, political say we can't tell them that everything didn't go perfectly, so don't say anything to anybody, and that's to me ... I mean, they're in charge so I do what they say but I really, really don't think it's the right answer a lot of times because if you don't say anything the assumption is going to be the worst possible scenario, which probably isn't the case and I think you'd get off a lot lighter if you explain.

Civil Servant 7 made a similar argument that civil servants are more likely than political appointees to be "objective about a situation." For him, this not only better served the American people's right to know, but also translated into greater efficacy with reporters because "there's no spin. I think reporters perceive appointees as, there's always sort of a shadow of a doubt, are they coming totally clean, are they conveying everything, what are they not telling me, is there something that is missing?"

Civil Servants 2, 4, and 6 both argued that appointees are better at communicating the administration's priorities or talking points, while civil servants are better at "communicating the substance that supports the policies." (Civil Servant 4). Interestingly, Civil Servant 2 reported that he was "definitely more effective in explaining how an inclusive economy in which low wealth individuals have an opportunity to get credit and capital is critical to the economy as a whole in moving forward. I can probably articulate that better, with more nuance and examples than a political, just because it's something I live and breathe, where they'll often boil it down to talking points that will work for them, that they understand and at times may also be colored by the overarching administration message."

The policy substance Civil Servant 2 was attempting to convey, of course, was a powerful argument on behalf of Democratic policies. Given what we know about the "appointee

discount,” I would argue, in fact, that the Obama administration might be better served by a spokesperson making such an argument which would be perceived by reporters as more neutral given its source, yet would actually make a more nuanced and compelling argument for the administration’s priorities than Civil Servant 2 seems to suggest political appointees are even capable of crafting. Of course, this would not necessarily be the case if the current administration was Republican. However, the example is a striking indication of a situation in which a civil servant might actually better advance an administration’s priorities.

While the appointees generally believed that they made more effective administration advocates, at other points during in our conversations, two Obama appointees shed light on additional factors that may diminish the effectiveness of the particular individuals who serve as appointees. Obama Appointee 3 argued that the administration was “incredibly insular” and divided its own staff into “true believers and non-true believers.” He argued that the administration favored hiring individuals who had worked on the campaign, and placed them in senior positions even when they might have found others who were more qualified. Meanwhile, he said, “cabinet [secretaries] hire people from the campaign for White House access.” President Obama has elsewhere been accused of being insular in his staff picks (Nicholas 2010), while others have also questioned the power afforded to his White House aides. For example, in his memoir, former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates expressed dismay at the prerogatives asserted by White House staff, arguing that “for an [National Security Staff] staff member to call a four-star combatant commander or field commander would have been unthinkable when I worked at the White House – and probably cause for dismissal. It became routine under Obama.” (2014, 566).

However, Obama Appointee 5 shed light on part of the reason why the administration

may have relied so heavily on campaign aides in top posts, arguing that “there were a lot of extraordinarily smart people they were looking at to be Assistant Secretary [of Public Affairs at the Treasury] but the process of vetting and ridiculous information they needed to turn over, about spouses and kids and taxes, just became such a huge pain, that they missed out on some really, really good appointees. The process becomes so nasty ... [that] really smart, successful professionals don’t want to go through that ... the process was just such a turn-off, it’s hard to get people.” The impact on government efficacy of a vetting process widely perceived to be out of control has, of course, been well documented by other scholars (Mackenzie 2001).

Of course, the findings of this chapter on the political experience of civil servants cast doubt on the assertion of appointees that careerists lack political savvy. The next chapter will further call into question the appointee claims that civil servants are less loyal. On the other hand, the responses of reporters on the knowledge of civil servants and the “appointee discount” appear to affirm the claims of civil servants to serve as stronger advocates in the press.

## **VIX. Relative Savvy**

Finally, I considered whether the officials appeared to utilize savvy tactics in order to advance the administration’s goals.

During the course of my interviews, I likewise detected a lack of sophistication on the part of two of the civil servants whom I interviewed. Civil Servant 3 came to his position without any previous media relations experience, as was evident in his anomalous, yet nevertheless surprising, assertion that nothing could be done when a reporter for a major, mainstream publication wrote an inaccurate story. I found another Civil Servant whom I interviewed to be tediously verbose, at times continuing to drone on after I indicated to him several times that “I got it” in response to his lengthy answers. At one point, when after exhausting my subtler cues I

finally politely suggested we should perhaps not spend too much more time on a particular point he was making, he raised his pointer finger in the air and indicated he needed to finish reading me a passage from a book he had produced in his office before we moved on. However, both civil servants worked in lower-level posts – not the heads of public affairs positions that were most common among my interview subjects – and the latter civil servant worked in a position in which the law required that only very limited and technical information be released, perhaps justifying his more stereotypically bureaucratic behavior. Furthermore, I found their insufficiently sophisticated approaches to be significantly less of a threat to the administration than the truly inappropriate behavior of Bush Appointee 5, which is discussed in Appendix B. On the other hand, I found the formidable skill and qualifications of Civil Servants 1 and 5 to be especially remarkable. One civil servant who brought particularly strong policy background to his job described Treasury as his ideal post and had waited for years for a position to open up within the Department. Of course, the variability of the skill of my interview subjects is to be expected, as in any organization there are likely be particularly weak and particularly strong individuals.

However, while, as previously discussed, the reporters indicated that civil servants rarely pitched stories and were ineffective at making arguments, in other ways they appeared to employ savvy tactics to advance the administration’s goals. For example, I asked the government officials whether they utilized public opinion polls in their work – a tool which requires sophisticated planning and savvy analysis in order to utilize the results to inform a public affairs officer’s work. While none of the appointees indicated that they had utilized public opinion polls in their work, four of the seven appointees indicated that they had used or were planning to utilize public opinion polls.

I also asked the government officials whether they ever tried to appeal to the emotions, as opposed to the reason, of the American people in the messages they crafted – a tactic which evidences a sophisticated approach to attempting to shape how people will receive messages. Civil servants were also more likely to utilize this technique. While four of ten appointees indicated that they attempted to appeal to emotions, five of the seven civil servants reported doing so. The responses to these questions are described in greater detail in chapter 6, as they are also germane to the question of the permanent campaign.

This evidence suggests that civil servants may conduct their work with more savvy than that for which they are given credit by reporters – perhaps because reporters believe bureaucrats to be stereotypically unsophisticated and/or erroneously assume that the civil servants’ lack of overt partisan goals causes them to make less sophisticated efforts to advance the messages of the administrations they serve.

### **Possible Causal Factors**

I next considered possible factors that could influence the relative efficacy of the two groups.

### **Previous Professional Experience**

Despite the fact that political appointees tend to serve as spokespeople for the issues generally considered to be most high-profile and critical to the administrations for which they serve, as expected, civil servants brought significantly more professional experience to their jobs. While the average appointee whom I interviewed had just over five years of experience before his appointment as a Treasury spokesperson, the average civil servant had more than twenty-four years of previous experience before he started working in his Treasury public affairs position (including previous positions within the Treasury in offices other than public affairs). This means



that the average civil servant had more experience than more than four appointees combined. Half of the appointees had four or less years of work experience prior to becoming a Treasury spokesperson; two had just two years of experience. The Bush appointees overall had slightly more professional experience than the Obama appointees.

Without exception, every political appointee had previously worked in public affairs on a partisan basis – for elected officials, political campaigns, and/or a political party committee. Although a few of the appointees had limited private sector experience as well, overall the appointees had little previous professional experience beyond these political communications posts. Only two appointees reported having previous knowledge of the policy portfolio for which they were responsible.

Contrary to the conventional understanding of civil servants as technocratic and apolitical, the vast majority of the civil servants, like the appointees, had previous political experience. Surprisingly, the great majority of the civil servants had also previously worked in political roles – such as holding elected office or working as a lobbyist or for a political party committee, member of Congress or political campaign.

While the civil servants all brought a great deal of varied professional experience to their posts, unlike the appointees, the direct relevance of the previous experience of civil servants to their Treasury public affairs posts was more mixed. While four of the seven civil servants had previous experience working for the federal government in public affairs, three had no previous media relations experience at any organization before beginning their Treasury public affairs roles (although the latter civil servants all had significant policy experience). Still, because civil servants had so much more aggregate experience than the political appointees, the civil servants had on average more years of prior experience working in media relations positions than the

political appointees. Additionally, five of the seven civil servants reported having previous experience working on the policy issues for which they were responsible.

At the same time, three of the seven civil servants lacked any previous media relations experience – an art and science which does require prior training. Of the four remaining civil servants, one had very impressive media relations experience but no previous exposure to his subject matter portfolio. The evidence regarding how their previous professional experience impacted their efficacy is therefore mixed. The majority of the civil servants had previous experience in the policy areas for which they were responsible, which likely bolstered the efficacy advantage they enjoyed in their greater knowledge of their subject matter portfolios. On the other hand, the lower previous media relations experience of nearly half of the civil servants was likely a factor in their lower propensity to attempt to shape media coverage.

### **Education**

Whereas the Bush appointees tended to have slightly more previous professional experience, the Obama appointees possessed more elite educational qualifications. The majority of Obama appointees attended national universities, with an average ranking by *U.S. News and World Report* as the thirty-eighth best college in the country, and the Obama appointees held two graduate degrees. By contrast, the average ranking of the national universities attended by the Bush appointees was ninety-second in the country, and the Bush appointees held no graduate degrees. About half of the civil servants attended national universities, and these institutions had an average ranking of eighty-sixth best in the country. The other civil servants all attended regional universities. Among the regional universities attended by civil servants for which *U.S. News and World Report* rankings are available, the average ranking was thirty-third best

university in the region.

Overall, then, the appointees attended more elite undergraduate institutions than the civil servants. The subjects that the appointees studied were also more germane to their work. The great majority of appointees studied subjects I consider to be highly relevant to the work of a Treasury public affairs official, such as communications, public relations, journalism, economics, political science or government, with no significant differences between the Bush and Obama appointees. By contrast, some civil servants majored in areas with no relevance to their line of work. Less than half of civil servants studied subjects relevant to their work as undergraduates.

However, the civil servants were significantly more likely than appointees to hold graduate degrees. While the ten appointees brought just two graduate degrees to their jobs, more than half of the civil servants held graduate degrees. This is likely attributable in part to the fact that civil servants tended to be significantly older than the appointees. Half of the four graduate degrees held by the civil servants were relevant to their work; by contrast, both of the appointee graduate degrees were relevant and were earned at significantly more elite universities than the graduate schools attended by the civil servants.

Nevertheless, I concluded that, because the differences in the educational qualifications of the groups were relatively minor, they did not likely play a significant role in differences in the relative efficacy of the two groups.

### **Tenure**

As expected, the tenure of civil servants was significantly longer. The average civil servant had served in his Treasury public affairs post for six years at the time of interview (excluding time served in other Treasury and/or government positions), and the vast majority

were still serving in their posts. By contrast, the average political appointee worked at the Treasury for 2.55 years, and the vast majority of appointees were not still serving at the Treasury. The majority of appointees worked for the Treasury for two years or less; the average is skewed upwards by a couple of appointees who worked in Treasury public affairs for an unusually long period of time, and did not necessarily remain in Schedule C positions or in the role of spokesperson for their entire tenure. The Bush appointees whom I interviewed had a slightly longer average tenure than the Obama appointees.

It appeared that the dramatically longer tenure of the civil servants gave them a decided efficacy advantage in their greater knowledge of the policy portfolios for which they were responsible.

### **Workloads**

Finally, I attempted to ascertain whether the heavier workloads and longer hours of appointees influenced their efficacy by querying the officials about how they spent their time. As Table 1 (which is also considered in chapter 6) indicates, the heavier workloads of appointees did not appear to preclude them from engaging in the tactics of proactive, effective communications professionals, including pitching stories to reporters and crafting and implementing strategies to attain desired media coverage. Appointees reported spending an average of 18 percent of their time pitching stories – double the percentage of time spent by civil servants. Furthermore, while civil servants estimated spending 30 percent of their time crafting and implementing strategies to attain desired coverage – 2 percent more than appointees – this likely represented less overall time, because (as will be described in chapter 6) appointees reported spending more hours on the job. While Obama appointees in particular reported not having as much time as they would have liked to pitch stories, and therefore their heavy workloads likely diminished their overall

efficacy, the results indicate that their workloads did not preclude them from advancing the administration’s arguments in comparison with than civil servants.

Table 1: Distribution of Work Time for Public Affairs Officials at Treasury

	Percent of time spent pitching stories	Percent of time spent responding to inquiries from reporters	Percent of time spent crafting and implementing strategies to attain desired coverage
Average for Obama appointees	17%	53%	31%
Average for responding Bush appointees	24%	38%	25%
Combined average for responding appointees	18%	46%	28%
Average for civil servants	9%	28%	30%

I also asked the government officials whether their workloads were manageable, in another effort to ascertain whether workloads may have accounted for differences in their relative efficacy. As will be described in greater detail in chapter 6, it was clear that appointees were often overwhelmed, and that this lack of time to think was likely a factor in diminishing their efficacy. For example, Obama Appointee 3 explained that he was “totally frayed by the end ... It’s hard to drink from a fire hose and learn at the same time. That I found the most difficult part.” Obama Appointee 5 explained that there were “times where it felt like I couldn’t breathe because I couldn’t figure out what to do next.” He explained that “there were definitely some boneheaded things they asked me to do at Treasury, but I think I was probably so tired, I said ‘fine, I’ll do it your way.’” Bush Appointee 2 compared his “normal workload” of twelve to thirteen hour days before the financial crisis favorably with his work during the crisis, because beforehand “it was nothing where I was going too out of my mind.”

While the civil servants likewise generally described their jobs as demanding, it was evident that they were not working around the clock or finding their jobs to be “insane” or causing “scary” personal problems. Civil Servant 1 explained that he generally stopped checking his Blackberry at 7:00 pm on weeknights; Civil Servant 3 explained that he “probably put in nine or ten hours a day, but I know there are public affairs people who work twelve hours a day; I’m just not willing to do that anymore.” Civil Servant 4 described his workload as “reasonable; it’s manageable;” Civil Servant 6 explained that his workload was reasonable because his policy portfolio was “pretty narrow” and therefore “I rarely work weekends or need to respond then ... and I’m usually home by 6:30 or seven and rarely respond in the evening,” with no early mornings, either. Civil Servant 7 explained that “it’s a lot less intense of an environment here” than in his previous public affairs positions.

This lack of time that appointees had to think likely accounts for part of their lower overall efficacy.

### **Conclusions and Analysis: The Most Effective Administration Advocates**

I attempted to ascertain whether appointees or civil servants serve as better administration advocates, by testing the relative efficacy of my interview subjects. The results confirmed my hypothesis that civil servants in Treasury public affairs positions better advance the interests of the president than appointees, because civil servants were indeed found to be more effective than their appointee counterparts.

I had hypothesized that civil servants would be more effective, in part, because their longer tenure would give them greater knowledge of their policy portfolios, allowing them to make more convincing arguments to reporters. My interview subjects who were civil servants indeed reported having greater knowledge of their portfolios when they started in their positions. This appeared to give them an efficacy advantage, both because appointees spent more time on the job learning the substance of their portfolios and because reporters were, at least initially, skeptical of the knowledge of appointees in their interactions. Furthermore, civil servants had longer tenure in their posts, contributing to their knowledge advantages. The responses of both groups to the questions of whether they could conduct interviews in place of their principals and whether reporters had a knowledge advantage suggested that civil servants enjoyed greater overall knowledge of their portfolios, as well. While I had hypothesized that this greater policy knowledge would allow civil servants to make more convincing arguments to reporters, it actually appeared that civil servants engaged in less of an effort to make polemical arguments to reporters than appointees. However, paradoxically, this made the information they conveyed *more* convincing to reporters.

This is because, as I had also hypothesized, reporters were skeptical of the claims of appointees. Reporters believed that the *raison d'être* of appointees was to bolster the partisan goals and political fortunes of the president, even if it came at the expense of other values, such as transparency and accountability. The apolitical nature of civil servants, combined with the lesser efforts they made to “spin,” therefore, allowed them to build significantly greater credibility with members of the press, dramatically enhancing their efficacy.

I had further hypothesized, however, that appointees might have a slight efficacy advantage in one regard: they might have better access to information, work on more high-profile issues, and their superiors might make more time for them because they place greater importance on the press. The appointees certainly worked on more high-profile issues, and, therefore, had better access to the information generally most in demand by reporters. While civil servants reported that they had the access to their principals which they needed to do their jobs, appointees were slightly more emphatic that they enjoyed particularly high levels of access, perhaps giving them an additional efficacy edge – but not one which overcome the overall significantly greater effectiveness of civil servants.

Several of my other hypotheses, however, were not confirmed. I had hypothesized that the shorter tenure of appointees would give them weaker relationships with the reporters who covered their agencies. While I judged appointees to have weaker relationships with reporters, this was bred by the reporters' perceptions that appointees were driven by purely partisan motivations and were providing insufficient information and access – not by their shorter tenures. Indeed, because the reporters appeared to have more interactions with the appointees than with the civil servants, any advantages civil servants had in knowing reporters for a longer period of time did not appear to be the cause of the weaker relationships the appointees enjoyed



with the press. (It is, however, reasonable to presume that the knowledge civil servants had of reporters' previous stories gave them an efficacy advantage in anticipating the directions and content of their future stories).

I had further hypothesized that the massive workloads of appointees would explain the greater efficacy of civil servants, because appointees would be left lacking time to engage in proactive or manipulative strategies. While the workloads of appointees were found to diminish their overall efficacy, giving them less time to pitch stories than they would have liked, in one regard, it did not give them an advantage in comparison with civil servants. This was the case because, despite the large volume of incoming press queries they received, appointees still managed to pitch significantly more stories to reporters than their civil service counterparts. Furthermore, civil servants indicated that they spent only two percent more of their time than appointees crafting and implementing strategies to attain desired coverage – which, as previously discussed, reflects rough estimates and may have represented less overall time, since appointees worked longer hours. Nevertheless, the workloads of appointees helped explain the greater efficacy of civil servants in another regard: appointees reported that their massive workloads often left them with little time to think; Obama Appointee 5 described executing strategies against his better judgment, simply because he did not have the energy to argue with his bosses. This did not appear to be the case for appointees' civil service counterparts.

My results indicate that civil servants were generally more effective in advancing the goals of the administrations for which they worked. Perhaps most critically, civil servants appeared from both their own descriptions and from the accounts of reporters to have better knowledge of the policies for which they advocated. While this differential could perhaps have been overcome if appointees, after learning on the job, stayed in their positions for a long period

of time, of course the opposite was true. It is difficult to see how a public affairs official can influence media coverage in a sophisticated manner without deep knowledge of the subject matter for which he or she is responsible. Without understanding a policy in significant detail, it is difficult to explain it convincingly to others, or to rebut the arguments of critics.

While the previous finding was expected, on certain measures, civil servants displayed a level of sophistication in their work which contravened traditional stereotypes. In one of the most remarkable findings of this project, civil servants were more likely to attempt to appeal to the emotions of the American people and to utilize public opinion polls in their work – evidencing a level of sophistication that exceeded that of their appointee counterparts on these measures.

Of course, the effectiveness of civil servants is often contended to be undercut by their lack of political savvy, as Obama Appointees 1 and 5 alleged. However, the results of this study cast doubt on this conventional wisdom. Surprisingly, the vast majority of civil servants had previously served in hyper-partisan positions, which appeared from my interviews to have given them such political skills. (To be sure, if their partisan backgrounds and skills caused them to attempt to sabotage administration efforts, this would have made them particularly dangerous actors from the perspective of the president; however, chapter 5 will not find this to be the case). Throughout my interviews, numerous civil servants made comments which indicated that, while they are legally prohibited from engaging in political activity, they nevertheless apply their appreciation of political nuance in ways that would be helpful to the president. Civil Servant 6 explained that if he did not conduct himself in a politically astute manner, his bosses would be upset with him. Civil Servant 2 explained that when he developed talking points, he worked to ensure that they would be consonant with the political perspectives of his bosses. Civil Servant 5 explained that he was aware that, if he had contradicted the political messages of appointees in

any way, the appointees would have stopped him from speaking.

To be sure, however, *all* political appointees had prior political experience, in comparison with *most* of the civil servants. And, reporter 2 was explicit that he sometimes found civil servants to be incognizant of political factors. Furthermore, presidents cannot count on future civil servants to necessarily have political experience, nor can they control for this outcome, since civil service rules are designed explicitly to prohibit such factors from influencing hiring processes.

Additionally, other evidence pointed to a somewhat lower level of sophistication among civil servants in dealing with the media. Civil servants seemed downright passive in comparison with appointees in attempting to counter negative media coverage, and they appeared to exert lesser overall efforts to make arguments. Civil servants also made significantly less efforts to pitch stories to reporters than appointees – a discrepancy that is especially remarkable given that the workloads of civil servants were so much lighter than those of their appointee counterparts. Some reporters complained that, in addition to lacking political savvy, civil servants also lacked a sense of what was newsworthy and interesting, or were incapable of making convincing arguments when they tried (ironically, as will later be discussed, this lack of sophistication may have some ways redounded to the administration's advantage).

As a group, however, the appointees possessed other effectiveness advantages. They had somewhat more access to key principals, and it also seems reasonable to presume that they may have been afforded more trust by senior administration officials, given their partisan credentials. As previously indicated, they pitched many more stories in an effort to proactively influence media coverage, and they made greater attempts to make arguments to reporters.

Accordingly, the evidence indicates that the appointees were in fact better advocates for

the administration than civil servants in one key area. When a reporter pursued a story that the administration did not like, appointees worked much more aggressively to change it. They even attempted to “edit” stories once they had been published – even if, as Reporter 5 explained, a story was not technically inaccurate and appointees simply took issue with the “adjectives.” This behavior appeared to serve the interests of the administration, since the reporters indicated that they sometimes did edit their work when they found merit in the complaints of appointees. Furthermore, the appointees were generally able to engage in this behavior without alienating reporters to the detriment of future coverage. Reporters clearly indicated that the appointees worked harder in an effort to influence their coverage on less contentious stories, as well, and seemed to sometimes have a greater sense of what was newsworthy. Appointees also appeared to be somewhat faster to respond to reporters.

Nevertheless, when the actual outcomes of their work were investigated in greater detail, it was clear that all of the efforts and advantages of appointees did not result in greater effectiveness in influencing media coverage to the benefit of the administration, for two critically important reasons.

First, this project discovered the existence of a previously unreported “appointee discount.” Reporters were adamant that they judged appointees to be deeply lacking in credibility, because they viewed their motivations as too overtly political. As a result, even when appointees had a good story to tell, the reporters indicated that they were simply reluctant to believe it. Reporters considered anything and everything that appointees attempted to convey as an attempt at partisan advantage. They generally indicated that they found it inconceivable that a pitch or argument made by an appointee would be motivated by a desire to serve interests beyond those of the president, such as making information available to the American people.

Reporter 6 even indicated that, although he tried to keep an open mind when speaking to sources, he simply found this to be impossible with appointees! Reporters were clear that they saw civil servants as more credible and trustworthy sources. By contrast, appointees entered into conversations with reporters at a disadvantage compared to other sources. This obviously significantly handicapped their ability to do the core function of their jobs, which is to advance the administration's positions in the press.

It is ironic that, in this sense, the lower sophistication that reporters perceived on the part of civil servants may actually have benefited the president. This case was made directly by Civil Servant 1, who noted that he thought his bureau received better media coverage when appointees did not attempt to overtly shape stories that reporters were working on, because in such cases the bureau made less attempts to spin, and reporters appreciated this. Civil Servant 1 also explained that he felt that, when his bureau had negative news to report, coverage was more favorable if he was forthcoming with the rationale for what had happened and how it would be fixed, but appointees often rejected such strategies. Civil Servant 7 was likewise clear that his lack of "spin" allowed him to achieve greater influence with reporters.

Civil Servant 2's explanation for why he could explain economic fundamentals that actually justify the administration's programs better than appointees was a particularly striking example of how the knowledge of civil servants can also be a powerful weapon in advancing administration priorities. The fact that we now know that reporters would have viewed his arguments with greater credibility than those of appointees makes him a doubly powerful advocate for the president.

The respect and credibility that reporters afford civil servants was also evidenced by the responses of reporters. Reporter 1, for example, was explicit that he is suspicious only of

appointees, and not of civil servants. Reporter 3 was likewise clear that he considered civil servants to be motivated by the aims of serving their country, as opposed to the president. This positions civil servants to be particularly powerful agents on behalf of an administration, because they are viewed as credible in the eyes of the media.

Second, appointees appeared to be unskilled at providing information to reporters. While the complaints of reporters must be interpreted in light of their own interests in obtaining access to maximum information, reporters were also clear that they often could have better conveyed the administration's perspective, if only they had understood it. They repeatedly emphasized that appointees had continually forgone opportunities to shape the thinking of reporters by simply explaining the rationale for their policies and positions. Reporter 3 argued that getting to know senior administration officials better would have, by virtue of human nature, hampered his inclination to be overly critical of them. Reporter 5 explained that if the administration had fed him information, at times he would not have had to go looking elsewhere for stories the administration ultimately disliked. And, when appointees did provide information, reporters often found it to be unhelpful, because it was political rather than substantive.

I suspect that the decision of appointees to be cautious in granting access to information was, at least in part, calculated. Appointees can only have been keenly aware that they were operating in a hyper-partisan climate in which anything they said might be used against them, and may simply have judged that they had more to lose than to gain in providing greater information to reporters. Their emphasis on caution in releasing information to the press can only have been heightened by the fragile state of the U.S. recovery and the global economy. As appointees explained, when the Treasury spoke, markets could move – and they were therefore justifiably concerned to avoid roiling them. At the same time, the examples that reporters

provided made it clear that there were instances in which the administration could have done a better job of providing access in savvy ways which would likely have advanced the president's interests without appreciable risk of partisan or economic harm.

It seems clear that, for appointees, part of the problem may have been that they simply did not have much time to think. However, I also suspect that if they had understood the substance of their issues in greater detail, they might have better been able to identify opportunities and confidently calibrate the (sometimes low) levels of risk involved in the more innocuous requests of reporters. They also would have been able to themselves provide explanations of Treasury policies, programs, and thinking to reporters on the myriad technocratic matters that did not pose risks to the country's economic stability or the president's political fortunes.

In sum, it appears clear that civil servants are generally better positioned to advance an administration's positions. By contrast, appointees are viewed by reporters as having truly suspect motivations, and therefore lacking credibility. A spokesperson with such a handicap can most certainly not effectively do his or her job. (As Bush Appointee 1 explained, "to me the most important characteristic of a really effective spokesperson is credibility.") Thus, despite the perhaps less sophisticated approach of civil servants in some areas, it was clear that the civil servants served as more effective advocates for the president than the appointees studied in Treasury public affairs posts.

This study also investigated possible causal factors for this greater efficacy. Civil servants brought significantly more extensive previous professional experience to their jobs. For example, at their time of hiring, civil servants were more than four times more likely than appointees to have at least five years of experience, including relevant media and policy

experience. The average civil servant had significantly more previous professional experience than four appointees combined (which is especially striking when considered in light of the fact that there are only seven appointees currently serving as Treasury spokespeople). While some of the prior professional experience of civil servants was less relevant to their jobs than the more limited and targeted experience of appointees, the civil servants still had many more years of relevant professional experience than their appointee counterparts, and their aggregate years of experience can only have contributed to their maturity and judgment.

Furthermore, the average civil servant had already served in his position much longer than the tenure of two appointees combined and was still serving, which appears to have enhanced their mastery of their positions. As Obama Appointee 3 explained, civil servants have “seen stories before on particular subjects,” allowing them to predict the types of questions reporters would ask and arguments reporters would make, when covering those subjects in the future. These two factors likewise contributed to their greater efficacy.

One of the causal mechanisms which I investigated did not appear to influence the efficacy of the officials. While the appointees had just slightly stronger and more relevant educational backgrounds, this did not appear to give them an efficacy advantage, as civil servants possessed greater mastery over the subject matter for which they were responsible.

Likewise, the greater workloads of appointees may not necessarily have rendered them less effective in one regard. The appointees’ greater workloads did not reduce their ability to act proactively in comparison with civil servants. Having more free time to implement proactive strategies would have possibly actually *diminished* the efficacy of reporters, since reporters viewed their claims with such suspicion. (Of course, on the other hand, if appointees had reduced workloads and used the extra time to learn the substance of their policy issues better, this would



have improved their efficacy). However, appointees indicated that they were so overwhelmed that they sometimes did not have time to think, or moved forward on strategies despite their better judgment – likely also explaining the greater efficacy of civil servants.

The results, then, suggest that civil servants may be more effective than their appointee counterparts. As chapter 7 discusses in greater detail, this questions the wisdom of the policy of politicization pursued by modern presidents.

## **Chapter 5: Results: Loyalty of Appointees vs. Civil Servants**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews the results of my interview questions designed to assess the relative loyalty of political appointees and civil servants in Treasury public affairs positions. I have defined loyalty as the pursuit of the president's goals – even when they conflict with an official's own personal goals. A key concept in this chapter is “leaks,” which I have defined as information given without attribution to reporters which does not further the interests of the administration and would not be approved by an official's supervisors. I hypothesized in chapter 3 that political appointees would be no more loyal to the president than civil servants, because appointees would have greater incentives to leak information in order to build relationships with reporters and bolster their future career prospects.

I used six instruments to measure which group is more loyal to the presidents they serve.

First, I asked the appointees and civil servants what someone in their position should do if asked to advocate a policy with which he or she personally disagreed. Second, I asked both groups of government officials how often they personally disagreed with an administration policy they were required to advocate and how they reacted in such circumstances.

Third, I asked the officials whether leaks to the press occurred in their offices, and if they were aware of whether the officials responsible for the leaks were appointees or civil servants. Fourth, I asked the officials whether they personally had ever been tempted to leak information to the press. Fifth, to corroborate the accounts of the appointees and civil servants, I asked the reporters how often both groups of officials leaked information to them.

I also examined two possible causal factors for differences in the relative loyalty of the two groups. First, I asked both groups of officials whether their personal political views impacted

their work. Second, to gauge the degree to which support for the president is critical to their work, I asked only the appointees whether they would consider serving as a Treasury spokesperson under an administration of a different political party. I hypothesized in chapter 3 that many of the duties of appointees are not very political, and therefore civil servants could easily replace such officials.

### **I. What Public Affairs Officials Should Do If Asked to Advocate a Policy With Which They Personally Disagree**

I first asked both groups of officials what they thought someone in their position should do if asked to advocate a position with which he or she personally disagreed, as a way of measuring whether they believed acts of disloyalty would ever be appropriate.

Appointees universally indicated that if someone serving in their position disagreed with a policy they were responsible for advocating, he or she should nevertheless communicate the administration's position faithfully. Two Obama appointees and two Bush appointees indicated that, in such a position, an appointee should first voice their disagreements internally, but if they were overruled, they had a responsibility to advocate the administration's policy. Two Bush appointees indicated that the exception to this rule would be if the disagreement were "so severe" (Bush Appointee 3) or "crosses an ethical or moral line, in which case you refuse to do it, but that's a really tough standard." (Bush Appointee 4). Obama Appointee 5 was the sole appointee who said that "often the teams are big enough that you can say you're not comfortable handling that one and ask a colleague to take it." But the response of Bush Appointee 1 was typical: "you can't cherry pick what you want to talk about. If you aren't comfortable with it, that's fine; maybe this isn't the correct job for you."

The responses of six of the seven civil servants were strikingly similar to those of the

appointees. These civil servants were quite adamant that, in the words of Civil Servant 3, “if it’s not gonna kill you, if they’re not asking you to lie, then you do it, because you are here, you work for who you work for.” Civil Servants 3, 6, and 7, like several of their appointee counterparts, indicated that a civil servant in this position should first voice his or her disagreement to their boss, but then fall in line if overruled. Civil Servant 2, however, suggested that, if he were in this position, the reason for sharing his concern with his supervisor would be that “in that instance it might be appropriate to have my boss ... speak to the [reporter] because [my disagreement] could potentially come through.” Sadly, Civil Servant 1 advised the opposite, explaining that “in government you probably don’t want to have a conversation with the political [appointee] telling them you think it’s a bad idea, because it’s not well taken, it’s not taken as constructive criticism, but a lot of it is because they’re very young people that don’t have a lot of experience. In the political realm, if you express misgivings, it’s taken more as, ‘you’re not on board and I can’t trust you.’”

The striking exception to these responses that the official in question should advocate the administration’s policy was that of Civil Servant 7, who indicated that the official could “talk to reporters off the record to explain [why the administration’s policy was wrong] ... let them find other sources to quote; point them in the direction of other reports.” He used an example of an instance in which he personally had done so, because he and other career staff in his bureau felt that the administration was bowing to special interests instead of implementing a policy which could save taxpayer money. I found his argument as to why the administration was wrong in this instance to be compelling. However, Civil Servant 7 noted that, in conveying messages that question administration policy off-the-record, he was not sharing his *personal* opinion with the press, but rather that of the head of his bureau. Additionally, the example he used was not an

issue on which there was partisan disagreement, further suggesting that he was motivated by a desire to improve his bureau's policy rather than political aims. I also happened to know that, when I worked at the Treasury, the policy to which he referred had caused significant disagreement and argument among appointees – something I had overall rarely witnessed, suggesting the anomalous nature of the situation.

These findings indicate that most civil servants are similar to appointees in believing that, even when they disagree with an administration policy, their position requires them to loyally convey the administration's beliefs. Nevertheless, not all civil servants will do so. In this study, one out of seven civil servants expressed a willingness to speak out when he felt the administration was wrong – but only to express the beliefs of the bureau for which he worked.

Of course, this number comes from a small sample. However, I suspect that it likely overstates the propensity of civil servants to convey their disagreement with an administration to the press, due to selection bias. As discussed in chapter 3, although I reached out to nearly every Treasury bureau to request interviews with career public affairs staff, not all civil servants agreed to my request for interview. It is reasonable to project that the civil servants most cautious about sharing information would have declined my request for interview, while those most willing to be open about their views (and thus also most likely to share their concerns or disagreements with the press) would have been more likely to agree to participate in this project, resulting in a sample which over-represents individuals who might convey their disagreements to the press. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate empirically that not all civil servants will be completely loyal to the president – a factor which must be given serious consideration in determining which group more effectively advances the president's interests. This finding is also logical, since it is reasonable to presume that individuals personally appointed by the president due at least in part

to their ideological agreement would behave more loyally towards the administration than individuals who go through no such selection process and are protected from being fired for political reasons.

Likewise, one out of seven civil servants volunteered the fact that he could not share his concerns with appointees – an indication of poor leadership amongst appointees which is clearly bad for the American people. However, based upon the examples he used in our conversation, Civil Servant 1’s particularly scathing opinion of appointees – which were anomalous in their intensity – appeared to have been influenced significantly by his prior experience in a different government agency.

## **II. How Often Government Officials Disagreed with the Policies They Advocated**

To measure the potential for acts of disloyalty, I next asked the officials how often they disagreed with policies they were responsible for advocating. Both the Bush and Obama administrations appeared to have succeeded in hiring true believers for their political posts. The appointees who worked under both administrations were clear that, in the words of Obama Appointee 2, “actually, I really agree with the policies we were pursuing at the time. I still do.” Bush Appointee 1 concurred: “I drank the Kool Aid.” Accordingly, the appointees reported rarely, if ever, disagreeing with a policy they were responsible for advocating. Asked to provide examples, only two Obama appointees and one Bush appointee could think of examples of administration policies to which they would have made adjustments. The only Bush appointee who was able to come up with an example served in his post the longest of any appointee. (Later in our conversation, a second Bush appointee also acknowledged that “with TARP, however, I think all of us, being more free market inclined, didn’t enjoy what we did, but we knew for the greater good of the country and for the financial system that we had to do what we had to do. But

I don't think any Republican at Treasury was happy bailing out the banks, but we were in a situation where that was the only thing we could do.”)

Civil servants reported that it was more common to have been placed in a position in which they were responsible for advocating a position with which they disagreed. However, even among this group, such situations were very infrequent. Five of the seven civil servants reported previously advocating a position with which they disagreed. However, one of the civil servants had done so in a previous federal government position and said such a situation had never occurred in his Treasury post. Of these five civil servants, four indicated that they had faithfully communicated the administration's views to the media, despite their personal disagreement. As discussed in the previous section, the exception to this rule was Civil Servant 7, who indicated that he had communicated his boss' disagreement confidentially to reporters. Of course, among these civil servants, such situations were exceedingly rare. As previously discussed, Civil Servant 1 said it had occurred in a previous post but never at the Treasury; Civil Servant 3 said it had happened “once or twice” in his post; Civil Servant 5 said it happened “occasionally;” Civil Servant 6 said it happened “a few times a year;” and for Civil Servant 7, it was “not that often.”

Civil Servant 1 recounted an incident in which a different government agency paid a large private contractor tens of millions of dollars to produce a product that never worked, was “bending over backwards not to make [the contractor] look bad,” and, following the debacle, went on to award the very same contractor an even larger contract to produce a different product. Later in our discussion, he also shared another example from the other government agency, in which the Obama administration was attempting to prove that they had done a better job on a particular initiative than the Bush administration. “Virtually every civil servant in [the agency] would have said they weren't, but the administration was like, ‘we want you to produce numbers

that say we're doing [better], so even though every civil servant I know would have said privately [that] this is crap, they didn't go to press, what they did is they did everything they could to support the request and find numbers, even though everybody was like, 'yeah, right.'”

The other examples all came from the Treasury. Civil Servant 2 used the example of a Treasury policy which saved taxpayers money but made it harder for Americans to access a service. Civil Servant 5 explained that he sometimes rolled out programs when he believed that it was obvious from the outset that they could not work. Civil Servant 6 used the example of an operational decision not to release information which he considered to be important. And, as previously discussed, Civil Servant 7 used an example in which he felt the Treasury was wasting money in the service of special interests.

To be sure, it is possible that the American people would have been better served in these situations if the civil servants *had* leaked so that there could have been a national debate about these issues. In such cases, the civil servants' views of the public interest conflicted with that of the present administration. However, arguments could also be made for the positions of the administrations they served. For example, the Obama administration has laid out reasonable arguments for the position they have taken on the issue on which Civil Servant 7 disagreed and subsequently leaked to the press. Furthermore, the civil servants in some sense enjoyed a privileged position in that their ability to make judgments that did not need to account for the political factors which often hamper the executive. As discussed in chapter 2, the president requires political support in order to govern; other actors take account of the level of support the executive enjoys when assessing the consequences they will face for disagreeing with him (Neustadt 1991). Therefore, even if a president believes a certain policy to be correct, he may nevertheless be unable to advance it if it will cost him support which will make it impossible to



achieve other goals which he judges to be more important. Presidents also have a tendency to conflate their own self interest in remaining in power with the national interest.

Of course, appointees are generally responsible for advocating the more controversial policies, but personal disagreement among this group of officials appears to have been headed off by their ideological agreement with the administrations they served. Civil servants are not selected by the executives for whom they work and serve in their positions for much longer periods of time, which we should expect to increase their instances of disagreement with the administrations they serve. On the other hand, the policies for which they are responsible are less controversial to begin with.

However, I wondered whether factors explored elsewhere in this project also contributed to the greater propensity of civil servants to have personal disagreements with the administration they served. For example, when I asked Bush Appointee 4 whether he had ever disagreed with a policy he advocated, he could not recall such an occasion, but then responded, “maybe I didn’t even understand the policy. Just kidding.” I suspected that his joke might actually have been revealing. I established in chapter 4 that civil servants appear to have significantly greater expertise in their subject matter portfolios, due to both the greater policy experience they bring to their posts and their longer tenure. As a result, civil servants might disagree more with administration policy simply because they understand it to a significantly more technical and nuanced degree than their appointee counterparts.

An additional reason why civil servants might have greater disagreements with an administration would be if they had more time to think about the policies they are advocating. As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6, the heavier workloads of political appointees likely leave them lacking time for reflection. For example, as will be again considered in the

following chapter, when I asked Obama Appointee 3 whether he ever disagreed with administration policy, he replied, “when you’re drinking from a fire hose, you don’t have the ability to think about it for too long. I was drinking from a fire hose, I was always at my fucking desk, I literally had no time.” Likewise, while Obama Appointee 5 indicated that he had never disagreed with administration policy, he said that he sometimes disagreed with the media strategies his bosses wanted to pursue, but “I’d say in this job you’re so exhausted and there’s so much to do, that you just want to move on ... there were definitely some boneheaded things they asked me to do at Treasury, but I think I was probably so tired, I said ‘fine, I’ll do it your way, and when this blows up it’s not my frickin’ fault.’”

Thus, the fact that appointees are more loyal to the administration’s policies seems at first blush to benefit the president, since we have seen that, although cases of civil service disagreement appear to be quite rare at the Treasury, and instances in which civil servants communicate their disagreement to the press are even rarer, it nevertheless does happen. However, to the extent that part of the greater loyalty of appointees stems from the fact that they do not fully understand the policies they are responsible for advocating and do not have the bandwidth to actually think about the actions they are taking, this ostensibly greater loyalty appears significantly less attractive to a chief executive. In this sense, the president might be better served by tolerating the small number of civil servants who on rare occasions will share their disagreements with the press, if careerists bring other significant benefits to the table – such as the ability to better explain the policies they are responsible for advocating because they understand them better, and the greater sense of clarity and strategy that comes from time to think.

### **III. Knowledge of the Identities of Leakers**

To determine whether civil servants or political appointees leak information to the press more frequently, I asked both groups of government officials whether leaks to the media occurred while they were serving in their Treasury posts, and if so, whether they knew if the leakers were appointees or civil servants. I defined “leaks” for my interview subjects as “information given without attribution to reporters which does not further the interests of the administration – as opposed to plants, which further the interests of the administration.”

Of the political appointees I interviewed, only one had actually determined the identity of a leaker, and the leaker was an appointee. This Obama appointee, who handled two major leaks, learned that one of the leakers was an appointee but indicated that, although he and his public affairs colleagues were surprised by the leaks, he “can’t guarantee they weren’t signed off on by someone else” in the administration, perhaps to give reporters information that the Treasury would not officially release because it was too sensitive and market-moving.

Additionally, one Obama appointee handled leaks that he suspected came from the White House or another government agency, but he was unsure whether appointees or civil servants were responsible. A Bush appointee who handled the same portfolio as the previously-discussed Obama appointee suspected that leaks came from a different government agency than the agency suspected by the Obama appointee, but was likewise unclear of the identity of the leaker(s).

One Bush appointee discussed a particularly egregious leak of a counterterrorism initiative which the Treasury did not wish to announce, but was unaware of the identity of the leaker (who could have been an outside party). This event will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. Another Bush appointee recounted an incident which first appeared to be a leak but which he later discovered to be the result of poor coordination, because the White House

released information without his knowledge, while his principal was overseas communicating a different message.

Of the civil servants, four were aware of the identities of individuals responsible for events which I considered to meet my definition of leaking, and all of the leakers were political appointees. However, the fourth civil servant described a period of numerous leaks which could have only been conducted by appointees, suggesting perhaps a greater number of appointees who leaked.

One civil servant reported that a leak occurred when an appointee had access to information about an upcoming announcement and sent it to someone in Congress.

Two other civil servants described two separate instances in which appointees had shared information with outside audiences that they had not been approved to discuss. The first of these two civil servants indicated that an appointee discussed a program in a speech before the administration had officially launched the initiative. The civil servant indicated that the appointee did so in order to gain personal credit for the initiative. (In a particularly brash move, the appointee did not provide the information to the press anonymously, per the terms of the definition of leaking I gave to the government officials. I nevertheless consider this event to be a leak because the appointee provided information to the press which did not serve the administration's interests, which gets to the heart of the issue. Such information is typically provided anonymously simply in an effort to protect the leaker). The civil servant indicated that this leaker received a "slap on the hand" from the administration. The other civil servant described a similar situation in which an appointee provided information the administration was not yet ready to announce to an outside group, and assumed that the appointee did so to make his office look good.

A fourth civil servant described a period of intense leaking as the administration attempted to decide the future of particular policies in response to the financial crisis. He said that “everybody was looking for a magic bullet; different politicals were looking for different ideas, which they’d try to float up the food chain, and one or two tried to float ideas with the media as trial balloons to see if they would work.” He indicated that the leaks could only have come from appointees because there were only a small group of appointees in the room when the discussions which leaked occurred. This indicates that while at least one appointee was responsible, it is possible that other appointees were leaking, as well.

A final civil servant discussed some initiatives his bureau undertook in which “it’s come to a point where it’s unusual for these actions not to leak,” however he was unaware of the identity of leaker(s) and indicated that the leaker(s) could have been third parties with whom his bureau was in negotiations.

A single civil servant described a situation in which he and his civil service boss had “leaked” information. However I did not consider his description to meet my definition of leaking. This civil servant described a situation in which someone in his bureau had made a mistake which caused a problem, and public affairs appointees wanted him to simply tell reporters that there had been a technical problem. To allay concerns reporters raised about the possibility of future technological errors, he and his boss both indicated that the problem was “rare” or “unusual.” This angered the appointees, who had not wanted them to share further information beyond the fact that a technical error had occurred, but the civil servant said he genuinely did not realize that this would upset them. He said that “leaks” like this happen a few times per year, “frequently because there’s a lack of understanding of where the administration is coming from, why that would be bad to be out there. Politicals might see it more as ‘they’re

undermining our position,' whereas civil servants are like, 'why do you care? It's not that big a deal.'" He indicated that, in such instances, "usually you find out afterwards" from appointees that they did not want particular information to be shared, indicating that when he receives instructions from appointees, "even if I disagree with it, if that's what they want to say, we'll say it." He was also clear that "I haven't run into anything where the civil service is literally trying to undermine the administration in any way, shape, or form." I judge the fact that this civil servant truly was unaware beforehand that appointees did not want him to share particular pieces of information and that he did not believe such information to be damaging to the administration to disqualify these examples from my definition of leaks.

Finally, Bush Appointee 3 revealed later in our conversation that he "knew lower-level White House people who leaked. It's known within our circles. The motivation was to curry favor with reporters and burnish their own coolness." Bush Appointee 3 found this to be odious, describing it as "a sign of weakness, not strength."

Thus, I encountered five specific situations in which officials were able to identify leakers of Treasury information as appointees, although in reality this number is possibly greater because the civil servant who described the leaks of information that was discussed in small meetings attended only by appointees indicated that such leaks occurred quite frequently, for a period of time, suggesting that more than one appointee may have been involved. A Bush appointee also claimed to be aware of Bush White House appointees who leaked. By contrast, the government officials did not report a single event that met my definition of leaking by a civil servant (although, as previously discussed, Civil Servant 7 previously admitted to personally leaking information). Of course, such leaks by appointees never appeared to be attempts to undermine the administration for whom they worked, but rather to be efforts to make themselves

look good and/or to advance their preferred policies. I next asked the government officials whether they themselves had ever been tempted to leak information to the press.

#### **IV. Whether the Officials Were Personally Tempted to Leak**

I next asked the officials whether they personally had ever been tempted to leak information, as a way of determining whether they had in fact ever leaked information to the press. Every political appointee said no, with the exception of Obama Appointee 3, who indicated that he had been tempted to leak but could not tell me more than this. I took this as an indication that he might have leaked information to the press. Obama Appointee 3 had told me previously in the interview that “I didn’t really ever leak anything because, with leaks, the whole point is to move something you can’t move through normal [channels],” suggesting that he already enjoyed power within the administration which made leaking unnecessary. However, in a previous conversation when I first requested an interview with a different Obama appointee who participated in this project, this other Obama appointee volunteered to me that he suspected Obama Appointee 3 of leaking information to reporters.

Additionally, during the course of our interview, Bush Appointee 3 volunteered to me, without provocation, that he suspected that Bush Appointee 5 had leaked information to reporters. As previously discussed, I did not believe that Bush Appointee 5 trusted me, nor did I trust his answers, so I do not believe that he would have told me if he had in fact been tempted to leak or leaked information to reporters.

As previously discussed, Civil Servant 7 previously admitted to leaking to the press. Five of the other six civil servants indicated that they had never been tempted to leak in their Treasury posts, although one civil servant indicated that he had leaked in a previous federal government job. In this instance, he was attempting to keep pressure on another government agency but was

told to issue his announcement on the Friday of a holiday weekend. He chose to instead give reporters the information in time to publish it on that Friday. Accordingly, he was yelled at by two senior officials. Asked whether he was glad he did so, he replied that “in retrospect, I don’t think I achieved anything. I don’t think the world is a safer place because of it. I wouldn’t do it again. I’m also ten years older; I have a bigger mortgage. Perspectives change.”

A final civil servant indicated that he had been tempted to leak information during the Bush administration, but had not done so. The example he used was of Treasury data which pointed toward the impending subprime mortgage crisis of 2008. “It just seemed the Treasury leadership was really slow to catch on to the mortgage crisis and some of the facts and data we had here were kind of alarming and I thought more attention should be paid ... the administration line was this is simply a market correction, but you could just see it building up.” However, he indicated that he ultimately did not leak the information because “they’re my boss; right or wrong, I work for the administration and I’m loyal to my employers, and I think I probably took an oath or something along the way and said I wouldn’t do it.” The position in which he served made me judge his claim to have identified early warning signs of the crisis as credible. Ironically, however, such a leak would have not only served the American people but arguably, ultimately, the Bush administration as well.

Nevertheless, the findings here document a single admission of a civil servant who leaked information to the press and no such admissions by appointees. Most of the claims of leaking by appointees came from civil servants. While I would have judged the results unreliable if I had simply asked the civil servants in the abstract which group is more likely to leak, the fact that they described very specific examples and circumstances made me judge their responses as very



credible. To corroborate this finding, however, I also asked reporters who interacted frequently with these officials whether civil servants or appointees leaked to them more frequently.

## **V. Reporters on How Often Appointees and Civil Servants Leak**

When asked how often both groups leak, several reporters described a strikingly similar pattern among civil servants of being willing to acknowledge viewpoints beyond those of the administration.

Reporter 6, who reported least on the Treasury, indicated that no appointee or civil servant had ever leaked to him, but he believed this to be the case because he had not been pursuing stories that would lend themselves to leaking. Reporter 5, a veteran Treasury reporter, indicated that while neither group had ever leaked to him, when talking to civil servants, “sometimes you get a sense, not directly but perhaps in talking to them, ... they’re not too keen on whatever policy’s being pursued, but that’s rare ... Normally they’re pretty much on board.”

Like Reporter 5, Reporter 1 indicated:

I do not recall a really hard and fast single example of a civil servant leaking to me, but I have had them say to me, you should take a look at this or that area that would balance out what you were being told elsewhere. They weren’t leaks. They were steers. I don’t think it was intended to steer you towards something negative, but towards a balanced or more nuanced look. ... I don’t think people were doing it out of any sense of vindictiveness. I think they were doing it because they could tell you were trying to understand or explain something; they were trying to give you a fuller picture of a whole situation so that you wrote about it more knowledgably and understood better what was going on. Nobody ever came to me and said, ‘I want to bring this person down or tear

down some institution.’ It was always in the context of ... ‘that’s the position we’re taking, but you could make an alternative case too,’ which would lead me to broaden out my own look at a particular situation.

Reporter 1 estimated that this might only happen once every three to four years. Reporter 7 described a very similar scenario, in which civil servants are “willing to acknowledge that they aren’t as team cheerleader about [the issue] or as defensive; they state the case but they can also acknowledge there’s another side to things.”

Like Reporters 1 and 5, Reporter 3 estimated that civil servants leak slightly more than appointees. Reporter 3’s description of instances in which civil servants convey their disagreement was similar. He indicated that civil servants “will sometimes leak because [he or she] feels there isn’t sufficient publicity to an issue or the agency isn’t being sufficiently transparent – not so much in my experience to embarrass anybody. There’s a feeling there’s not being enough attention paid to this and they want to get it out. It doesn’t happen often; it happens occasionally.”

However, unlike Reporters 1 and 5, Reporter 3 indicated that appointees will sometimes (though rarely and less frequently) leak as well. He indicated that this has happened only a handful of times, and only under two specific types of circumstances. The first was to undermine other administration officials. “I don’t know of an appointee leaking something to me that undermined the Treasury Secretary or the President,” he said. “They may have leaked me something that undermined another agency – maybe the Chairman of the FDIC ... but not their boss.” The second set of circumstances in which he indicated appointees would leak would be to explain that they disagreed with the administration’s strategy. “I would say what I’ve gotten for

the most part is indications they don't agree with the strategy, not so much a broad policy. Especially in public affairs, it wouldn't be that uncommon for someone ... to say, 'I really think we should have done a press conference, but I was overruled.' But ... I don't get stuff like, 'I don't think we should be doing outreach to Iran,' and don't think I will."

While Reporter 3 speculated that appointees engage in the latter kind of leaking because they are frustrated (and, as previously indicated, reported that such incidents were uncommon), Reporter 4 indicated that such "leaks" were actually "pretty frequent" in his interactions with appointees, and he believed that they could actually serve the interests of the administration.

It's a personal style for some people: 'Between you and me, I have great concern about X. But the official position is Y.' ... Though it may be because my perspective was obvious, so it's an open question to the extent to which they believed that or were trying to manage me. ... It creates an intimacy, I guess; it's a method of sort of distancing the subject and bringing the two of you closer. ... When done well, it can be very effective. It creates a sense of common ground. It's a natural way of disarming a critical question, that insertion of personal perspective. One of the most frustrating things is when there's obviously a problem and the agency simply denies it exists. It's infuriating and, really, it's true in life, they teach you in psychology. Saying 'yes, but' is much more effective than saying no. When a PR person says 'yes, but now that we're on the same side, let's think about this more carefully,' I think it's much more effective than negating the premise.

Accordingly, when Reporter 7 described civil servants as sometimes willing to

acknowledge the other side of things, I asked him if he thought this might actually improve the coverage they received. He agreed with Reporter 4 that “showing honesty is not always a weakness. It is appreciated. As opposed to a political who insists this is the way things are and you’re being ridiculous by not accepting our take on things.” To the extent this is true, such incidents should be categorized not as leaks but rather as sophisticated (and seemingly efficacious) public relations tactics.

Also like Reporter 3, Reporter 4 suspected that civil servants leak more frequently than appointees; however, he reported a significantly higher incidence of leaks among both groups. Reporter 4 indicated that leaking intensifies during periods of major change, describing the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath as a period of “intense leaking” during both the Bush and Obama administrations. “The stakes were high and the futures of agencies hung in the balance,” he explained. “In particular, civil servants were fire hoses because they perceived real risk to their agency mission and were not convinced the administration had the best interests of their agency in mind and saw real advantage in advancing their cases. When an agency comes to feel at odds with the administration, a civil servant will almost always identify with the agency ... [During the financial crisis] agencies perceived significant advantage in trying to shape the narrative and many sought to do so quite aggressively.”

This account is strikingly consonant with Durant’s theory, discussed in chapter 1, that civil servants will only involve outside actors such as the press in agency battles when they perceive a serious threat to their agency’s core mission. During the financial crisis, Reporter 4 indicated that appointees leaked “a little less” about these internal battles because “their bosses had the upper hand ... so they could argue internally and prevail, so they saw less advantage in talking to media.” However, he said, “appointees wanted to respond to leaks by independent

agencies ... so both did it a lot, but if I had to pick, maybe during that period, civil servants [leaked] more.”

While he described leaks as infrequent among both groups during more pacific times, Reporter 4 said he did not “know if [leaking] happens more often [among civil servants] but it feels like a higher rate because many of those agencies have interests discreet from those of the administration and see opportunities to advance particular agendas at the expense of or with indifference to the goals of the administration.” However, he was careful to indicate that the only time civil servants leak is to advance the beliefs of their agencies—not themselves personally (a stipulation also described by Civil Servant 7, the sole official who admitted to leaking in my interviews). “In instances where the agency felt the administration was wrong about a policy,... they would say the agency disagrees, but they wouldn’t disagree with an agency position. That’s very rare. I can’t even think of an example. It’s a sharp contrast.” Among appointees, Reporter 4 described the infrequent leaks occurring during calmer times as occurring when “interests of two parts of the administration are in conflict and one part sees advantage in leaking.”

Unlike the four other reporters who reported receiving leaks, all of whom perceived civil servants to leak somewhat more than appointees, Reporters 2 and 7 indicated that appointees and civil servants had about the same propensity to leak information. Reporter 7 indicated that both groups leaked a “handful of times a year:” appointees would leak when they disagreed about policy outcomes, at times to criticize other approaches or to influence their bosses by floating trial balloons in the press. Civil servants leaked when agencies disagreed amongst themselves. Interestingly, Reporter 7 used an example in which, like Reporter 4, he indicated that civil servants were representing “their agency’s perspective” – as opposed to their own personal points of view.

Reporter 2 was careful to note that he would “almost never get a call that is a true leak, where somebody says, ‘you should do a story on X because so and so is a jerk.’” However, he indicated that he “regularly” – on average a couple of times per month – would receive leaks in the course of other conversations. While he reported no difference in the frequency of leaking among the two groups, he contrasted their differences in intent. While appointees leak “with a specific goal of advancing their interest, or of who they’re representing, and pushing a particular angle, often to undermine someone else or to accomplish a political goal,” civil servants, according to this reporter, will leak “to point out how so and so is a bozo, look what they’re talking about, they’re wrong, here’s why I’m right and the other side isn’t going to get anywhere.”

This was the most dramatic description of leaking by civil servants that I encountered, since every other reporter tended to describe civil service leaks as being designed to show the other side of a debate or to advance agency interests. However, it is important to keep in mind that this reporter was clear that such leaks happened only in the course of other conversations; civil servants did not actively approach him with such claims. Interestingly, the description was made by Reporter 2, who worked for a media outlet popularly perceived as more conservative. Reporter 4, who provided the other rather dramatic account of leaking during the financial crisis, reported for a media outlet popularly perceived as more liberal. It therefore makes sense that these two reporters would provide the more “extreme” accounts of leaking, since leakers are likely to share information with reporters who they perceive to be sympathetic.

The results nevertheless point to more leaks by civil servants. Two reporters indicated that only civil servants “leak,” while four indicated that both groups of officials leak, but two indicated that civil servants leak more, while two indicated that the frequency of leaks was about

the same. However, with the exception of the epic upheaval of the financial crisis, leaks by civil servants were always described as rare. Furthermore, reporters' descriptions of these "leaks" were not very dramatic.

Civil servants did not appear to be dialing reporters to lodge complaints about the administration for partisan purposes. Rather, reporters almost always described situations in which they were already talking to civil servants and the careerists seemed more willing to acknowledge the possibility of alternate points of view than their more partisan appointee counterparts. The information shared by civil servants in these situations typically represented the viewpoints of their bureaus, not than the civil servants' personal views. Furthermore, the degree to which some of these instances meet the definition of leaking is therefore somewhat questionable, since, in cases where the civil servants were willing to acknowledge alternate points of view while communicating the administration's position and accordingly reporters found their claims to be more credible and persuasive, they would have served the administration's interests by advancing their goals in the press. Nevertheless, their actions in such cases would likely not have been approved by their political superiors, or by the president.

While it would certainly be naïve to believe that this was always the case, nevertheless, reporters did indicate that, in some cases, the willingness of civil servants to acknowledge other points of view may actually have helped the administration's cause, because, as Reporter 4 explained, "it's infuriating" when spokespeople try to deny the existence of an obvious problem. In fact, the greater willingness of civil servants to acknowledge alternate arguments could be part of the explanation for the low credibility that appointees hold in the eyes of reporters – which appears to significantly hamper their ability to do their jobs, as described in the previous chapter. Ironically, then, this behavior of civil servants might actually redound to the long term *benefit* of

an administration, if it causes reporters to perceive government officials as more transparent and trustworthy.

Of course, leaks by appointees appeared to be even rarer. As expected, they were driven by attempts to undermine other administration officials or to try to advance their policy interests during internal disputes.

### **Possible Causal Factors**

I next asked questions designed to determine whether the officials' political views impact their willingness to engage in acts of disloyalty to an administration.

## **VI. Whether Political Views Impact their Work**

First, I asked the government officials whether the political views of the people who work in their public affairs office have an impact on the work they do, and whether their personal political views impact their own work. Unsurprisingly, of course, appointees indicated that their partisan beliefs positively impact their work because they act as a driving motivation. More significantly for this test of loyalty, however, civil servants were adamant that their personal political beliefs played no role in their work.

With the exception of Bush Appointee 5, who said he declined to comment, the majority of appointees said that their political views impacted their work and the work of their colleagues in a positive manner. The response of Obama Appointee 1 was typical: "Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of people I worked with were liberal Democrats ... I can't think of an instance in which we acted against the public interest to advance the administration, but that's partly because we're appointees and view the public interest through the prism of what we believe in ... I think our



political views enhanced [our] work in some cases, because we believed in what we were doing, the righteousness of it, so in those circumstances, we might work even harder.” Bush Appointee 1 likewise reported that the appointees in her office “all believed in the charge, in the work we were doing.” This appears to have driven the appointees to work harder, perhaps making it easier for them to cope with their massive workloads, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The majority of civil servants, by contrast, were unwavering that their political views did not affect their work. In the words of Civil Servant 1, “all I care about is policy, and it’s all I ever cared about.” Civil Servants 3, 4, 6, and 7 explained that politics simply did not come into play in the areas in which they worked. In the words of Civil Servant 6, “a lot of what we do is very fact-based and there’s really not a lot of room for political interpretation.” Likewise, Civil Servant 7 explained that he focused on simply telling the story of the relatively apolitical work of his agency. Civil Servant 5 added that while his job “wasn’t so much about politics,” in fact politics did impact his work because he wanted to see the administration be successful. Finally, Civil Servant 2 acknowledged that politics did affect his work but said that “we’re pretty collaborative, so if a person above me espouses a belief I don’t agree with, I can say ‘here’s why I don’t agree,’ so it hasn’t impacted working with reporters or getting a good story out.”

Of course, it is much easier for civil servants to make such claims in the abstract – and perhaps difficult for any individual to truly disentangle the nuanced ways in which their beliefs might affect their behavior. Nevertheless, the civil servants were certainly clear in reporting that their political beliefs did not impact their work, and their claims are consonant with all of the other findings of this research which point to the conclusion that, while civil servants will not always be loyal, their acts of insubordination against an administration tend to be motivated by the goals and beliefs of their bureaus, as opposed to personal partisan views.

## **VII. Whether Appointees Would Do Their Work for a President of the Opposite Party**

I next asked only the political appointees whether they would consider doing their Treasury public affairs job under the administration of a different political party (this question would obviously be irrelevant to civil servants, who serve across administrations).

Six of the ten appointees indicated that they would not consider doing their job under the administration of a different political party or that it would be “highly, highly unlikely” (Obama Appointee 1), because “there was a real sense of camaraderie, a team atmosphere: this was our team, our guy” (Bush Appointee 3) and “I was really proud to serve for an administration I agreed with.” (Bush Appointee 5). Obama Appointee 4, whose portfolio was the site of epic partisan battles, explained that “my political views did impact my work and I do this work to try to help advance those views.” A seventh appointee, Bush Appointee 2, was basically also in this camp, indicating that he would only serve a different administration if the executive’s views more closely matched his personal policy positions than the Republican party.

Revealingly, however, two of these appointees indicated that their own policy portfolios would likely not differ significantly under the administration of a different party. The problem for these two appointees was rather that “probably 90 percent of other issues I’d have a different view on, so it would be tough to hold myself up as a spokesperson for the administration” (Bush Appointee 1) and “taken as a whole I don’t like what the Bush administration was doing, so I don’t feel like I would be as motivated. You want to feel like you’re having a positive impact.” (Obama Appointee 3).

Two Obama appointees indicated that they would consider serving in an administration of a different party because their portfolios were “pretty apolitical” (Obama Appointee 3) or “a little less political” (Obama Appointee 2). Bush Appointee 4 likewise indicated it would depend

on the policies of the administration, but he respected the policies of certain past Democratic Treasury Secretaries. Interestingly, then, while all of the previous evidence we have examined indicates that appointees were particularly loyal to the administrations they served, a full half of these otherwise very partisan appointees were clear that they would not necessarily expect the policies they advocated to change under administrations of a different party – indicating that the specific portfolios they covered were not very political.

While it would certainly not make sense for a president to actually hire appointees of an opposing party given the evidence we have previously examined about how the affiliations of appointees affects their motivations, the relatively apolitical nature of these portfolios suggests that civil servants might be slotted into them without detriment to the president. While some Treasury portfolios, such as Tax Policy, are hyper-political, others – such as TARP, Terrorism and Financial Intelligence and International Affairs – are simply not the locus of major partisan disagreement. These results speak to our ultimate question of how presidents should staff agencies for maximum performance, which will be addressed in chapter 7.

### **Conclusions and Analysis**

This study confirmed my hypothesis that civil servants would be no less loyal to the president than appointees. I hypothesized that this would be the case in part because appointees would have greater incentives to leak damaging information to the press, in order to bolster their less-certain future career prospects. Therefore, I expected to find that appointees would leak more information to reporters. In fact, however, appointees and civil servants appeared to leak with roughly the same frequency.

I further hypothesized that the president does not necessarily need appointees in some of the positions they currently fill, because their duties are not very political. This expectation was

also confirmed. As previously discussed, half of the appointees whom I interviewed indicated that they would not expect the policies they advocated to change significantly under an administration of a different political party.

Finally, I hypothesized that civil servants would be unlikely to engage in politically-motivated acts of disloyalty to an administration, because the civil servants would not have particularly partisan views in the first place. One civil servant was clear that he only cared about policy. However, the fact that the great majority of civil servants had previously worked in partisan political roles disproved this hypothesis.

As discussed in chapter 1, civil servants would emphatically not have served as effective administration advocates if their personal views caused them to attempt to secretly undermine the work of presidents with whom they disagreed – a charge leveled at them by legions of scholars and political operatives. However, my findings on the loyalty of appointees and civil servants indicate that, contrary to the assumptions of Moe and other scholars, civil servants are not significantly more likely than appointees to engage in acts of disloyalty to the administrations they serve.

One civil servant admitted to leaking information to the press that did not serve the administration's interests during our interview. While no appointees admitted to leaking, I had reason to question the veracity of the responses of two of the appointees. Coincidentally, two other appointees independently volunteered to me, without provocation, that they suspected these very same officials of leaking.

However, with the exception of Civil Servant 7, appointees and civil servants alike were adamant that their jobs required them to advance the views of their superiors, regardless of their personal beliefs. Additionally, both groups reported that it was unusual for them to disagree with

an administration in the first place, suggesting that, at least within the Treasury, presidents rarely face even the possibility of acts of disloyalty (although, of course, such instances of disagreement occurred more frequently in the case of civil servants, which would be expected given their longer tenure and apolitical selection processes.).

When I asked the government officials whether they were aware of the identities of leakers in their offices, no public affairs official had identified a single civil servant who had leaked information to the press. However, they provided evidence of leaking by a minimum of five appointees.

On the other hand, the responses of reporters (who should know the identities of leakers with greater accuracy) indicated that civil servants were more likely to leak. However, upon closer examination, many instances of purported “leaks” by civil servants appeared to reflect a simple willingness on the part of civil servants to acknowledge alternate points of view – which perhaps strikes reporters as remarkable simply because appointees are so unwilling to sometimes acknowledge the obvious. As we have seen, such dialogue may actually serve the administration’s interests, because reporters view such sources with greater credibility. It is also reasonable to believe that acknowledging other arguments may give government spokespeople valuable opportunities to rebut them. Nevertheless, appointees appeared more loyal in this regard as they did not proactively share alternate views with reporters, and it clear that such actions on the part of civil servants would not have been acceptable to their political superiors or the president.

In other cases, it was clear that civil servants did engage in the more literal definition of leaking. However, reporters emphasized that such events happened rarely. Such leaks were described by Reporter 4 as happening most dramatically when the very existence of agencies was

at stake, as the government crafted its response to the 2008 financial crisis – which is hardly a normal set of circumstances (although presidents do from time to time shutter or radically overhaul agencies). While the greater weight that should be accorded the views of reporters (who unquestionably know the identities of leakers) suggests that civil servants might in fact leak more than appointees, the results reported by the reporters were so close (of the reporters who received leaks, four believed that civil servants leaked more, including one reporter who was not entirely sure whether there was a difference between the two groups, and two reporters believed that appointees and civil servants leaked with roughly the same frequency) that it is not possible to definitively arrive at this conclusion.

Perhaps the most remarkable finding of all, however, is the willingness of civil servants to stay quiet. They described doing so even when they witnessed administrations wasting millions of dollars, attempting to make false claims for partisan advantage, and ignoring data warning of a grave, impending recession. The civil servants were also universally clear that their personal political views did not impact their work.

Of course, these mixed results are approximate; it would be impossible to quantify with precision actions which government officials have an enormous stake in concealing.

The results are nevertheless clear: civil servants and appointees both leak to the press. And both groups appear to leak with roughly the same frequency.

## **Chapter 6: Results: The Permanent Campaign**

### **Introduction**

The previous two chapters measured whether appointees or civil servants are more effective and loyal advocates for the president. I now turn to the question of how well appointees and civil servants serve the interests of the American people. In chapter 3, I hypothesized that I would find little difference between political appointees and civil servants in the degree to which they are engaged in the permanent campaign, and that this would largely be a result of the fact that heavy workloads prevent appointees from being as proactive as they might otherwise want to be. This chapter reviews the results of my interview questions designed to determine the degree to which Treasury public affairs officials are conducting a “permanent campaign.” I have defined the permanent campaign as using “government as an instrument designed to sustain an elected official’s public popularity” (Blumenthal 1982, 23). I have identified tactics of the permanent campaign as utilizing public opinion polls to govern, playing to the emotions of the American people, and withholding and distorting information.

Of course, as discussed in chapter 2, there is nothing inherently nefarious in the president’s attempts to build support; indeed, doing so is necessary in order for the chief executive to achieve his goals, since other actors consider the level of support the president enjoys when assessing the consequences they will face for contradicting his wishes (Neustadt 1991). However, the use of the tactics of the permanent campaign in order to build this support is potentially problematic. If an administration attempts to play too heavily to the emotions, as opposed to the reason, of the American people in the messages they craft, it might fail to convey facts which are essential for citizens to understand the state of the economy and hold their leaders accountable. Likewise, if an administration bases its governing decisions solely on public

opinion polls, they might fail to sometimes make the difficult decisions that serve the long-term interests of the nation. (Of course, such decisions themselves are themselves subject to active partisan debate, such as, for example, paying down the nation's debt). Furthermore, if an administration withholds or distorts information requested by the media, it might prevent the American people from obtaining the information they need in order to hold their government accountable and participate in key governance decisions.

I therefore used nine measures in order to investigate whether the officials were conducting such a campaign.

First, I asked the officials how much time they spent focusing on the profiles and images of the officials for whom they work, and whether it was a good use of their time. Of course, Blumenthal charged presidential aides with conducting a permanent campaign in order to boost the popularity of the president. Even though the Treasury Secretary and other senior officials are not elected, if the permanent campaign tactics were to have been extended into government agencies, it is to be expected that public affairs officials would focus on the images of their most senior principals.

Second, I asked the officials about the most sophisticated techniques they used to shape what reporters covered. To independently corroborate their claims, I also asked reporters about the savvier things that federal economic agencies did to shape the coverage they received in the press.

Third, I asked the government officials whether they ever attempted to appeal to the emotions, as opposed to the reason, of the American people in the messages they crafted.

Fourth, I asked the government officials whether they ever utilized public opinion polls in their work and, if so, how.



Fifth, I asked the government officials whether they believed it is ever appropriate for someone in their position to withhold information requested by the press, what the circumstances would be, and whether this happened often or rarely in their work. To independently corroborate their responses, I also asked reporters whether they became aware of practices public affairs appointees engaged in which they felt were inappropriate. If reporters did not respond by indicating that the officials had withheld information, I asked them directly whether they thought that the officials had done so.

Sixth, I asked the government officials whether they believed it is ever appropriate for someone in their position to shade the truth, what the circumstances would be, and whether this happened often or rarely in their work. To independently corroborate their responses, I used the responses of reporters to my question of whether they became aware of practices that public affairs appointees engaged in which they felt were inappropriate. If reporters did not respond by indicating that the officials had lied to them, I asked them directly whether they thought that the officials had done so.

Seventh, I asked the government officials whether they believed that it would be possible for someone in their position to tell untruths to make the president look good, and whether they or their colleagues had ever attempted to do so.

Eighth, I asked the government officials what percentage of the messages they sought to promulgate they would describe as ideas and narratives, as well as how they developed and sculpted narratives to make their points, in an effort to determine how they attempted to shape information to their advantage.

Ninth, and finally, I asked the government officials how their offices determined how to handle information that was potentially damaging or embarrassing.

### Measuring Causal Factors

I next investigated possible factors that could explain why the government officials were or were not conducting a permanent campaign. To determine the extent to which the potential for a permanent campaign existed, I first queried the government officials about their workloads, in an effort to determine how much time they had to engage in proactive tactics. Second, I attempted to determine how much of their time was spent proactively attempting to influence the media, and how much of it was spent reactively responding to requests from reporters.

To determine whether the officials were motivated by the goals of a permanent campaign, third, I queried the appointees and civil servants about the end goals of their work and, fourth, I asked them to what degree their end goal was to build public support for the president.

Finally, I considered whether those officials who studied journalism were less likely to engage in the tactics of the permanent campaign.

### Possible Differences Between the Obama and Bush Administrations

Finally, because reporters overwhelmingly indicated in chapter 4 that the Obama appointees were significantly less forthcoming with information than the Bush appointees, I attempted to ascertain whether there are differences in the practice of the permanent campaign among the two administrations I studied by asking many of my interview subjects what they thought accounted for this difference.

## **I. Time Spent Burnishing the Profiles of Government Officials**

As previously discussed, Blumenthal described one of the key tenets of the permanent campaign as attempts to bolster the images of elected officials. To measure whether a permanent campaign was being conducted in the Treasury, I first asked the officials how much time they spent attempting to burnish the personal profiles of their principals. Such efforts would be a logical extension of the permanent campaign within government agencies. While Treasury officials are not elected, the images of the president's most senior appointees bear directly on the reputation of the president.

Appointees generally indicated that they spent "some time," "not a ton," or, at most, 15-20 percent of their time focused on the images of the individuals for whom they worked. I found their arguments for doing so to be compelling.

Obama Appointee 1 explained that it "is a good and appropriate use of time because it is the nature of things that principals are identified and intertwined with the institution." Obama Appointee 2 explained that "your principal has to be seen as knowledgeable and accountable, [that] they know what they're doing, so I think building up a public profile is part of that. It also helps with their interactions with foreign officials, ... members of Congress, ... [and] members of the private sector." For Obama Appointee 3, "it reminded people that there was a human element" to his work. Likewise, Obama Appointee 5 indicated that "my thinking is that a public servant is paid by taxpayers, and any chance for them to get to know whose working on their behalf is probably something we should participate in, so when the chances came in, I worked hard for us to participate." Obama Appointee 4 explained that "it was a great use of my time because ... having principals who are so well-respected and so good in their issue area is definitely hugely beneficial and they were people who could talk to reporters and reporters didn't

feel like they were being spun around.”

Bush Appointee 1 likewise explained that people trust officials more when they see “the human interest side of things” and that if reporters like a principal, they are more likely to get positive media coverage – a belief also echoed by Bush Appointees 2 and 4. Bush Appointee 5 claimed that he could not understand the question.

The question was not relevant for one civil servant, because the job responsibility for managing the reputations of principals fell to others on his team. Civil Servant 7 explained that he spends “zero” percent of his time focused on the image of his principal and it would not be a good use of time because it would be “serving [the principal]; it’s not serving the organization.” He explained, “I think that’s where appointees become too focused on themselves and worried about their next life.” Another appointee who spent “not very much” time on the image of his principal said he thought having a more low-key image allowed his principal to better advance his agency’s work, which I considered to be a reasonable assessment given the nature of his bureau’s work which required projecting a degree of independence.

Every other civil servant saw value in such work. For example, Civil Servant 2 explained that “the more [his principal] is out there and looked at favorably, it raises the organization and the visibility we have in our programs.” Another civil servant explained that if a principal was seen as unfriendly to a particular group, it would negatively impact views of the agency’s programs. The amount of time they spent on the images of the officials for whom they worked varied, from one percent to five percent, to at “certain points quite a lot” and at others less so. Another civil servant explained, “I don’t know if I don’t spend any time on it or if I spend all my time on it. It’s just part of everything we do and I don’t make a distinction between making my agency look good and making a principal look good. I think it’s all connected.”

Thus, while I had hypothesized that appointees might spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on the images of the officials for whom they worked – which would both be an indication of the permanent campaign and an indicator that they were less effective, because the president would ultimately be better served if they spent their time promoting his policies – I did not find this to be the case. The amount of time both groups spent focusing on images appeared to be reasonable and, in doing so, appointees were clear that their end goal was to build credibility for their organizations, which would allow them to advance the administration’s work. Furthermore, the sophistication with which the civil servants likewise approached such work also served as an indicator of their overall level of competence. Thus, this measure did not provide evidence of a permanent campaign.

## **II. Most Sophisticated Techniques**

In an effort to identify any permanent campaign techniques in which they might be engaging, I asked the appointees and civil servants to tell me about the more sophisticated techniques they used to shape what reporters cover. The most striking thing about their responses was that they could all be found in most Public Relations 101 textbooks. Of course, this observation is not meant to diminish the difficulty of their work. The appointees, in particular, explained and defended some of the government’s most difficult decisions and high-profile policies – including extremely complex economic and financial matters – and attempted to calm global markets amidst the panic of the Great Recession and a particularly partisan national climate. The skill required to carry out such responsibilities should not be underestimated. However, the actual tactics they described employing in their work in no way struck me as particularly diabolical nor as different in kind from the strategies with which most public

relations professionals are familiar.

For example, Obama Appointee 1 explained that his more sophisticated strategies were giving information to reporters as a “source familiar.” “This is more subtle or sophisticated to move or shape stories – the sausage-making that may not seem obvious to the public at large.” Obama Appointee 2 explained that “managing a principal’s time” was the most sophisticated thing he did, explaining that he could generate coverage by making his principal available to the press. Obama Appointee 3 said the two keys to his job were being responsive to reporters on deadline and being nice. He also described being targeted and thinking “about who the best person is to write a story, creating a favor bank ... [and] giving them information and they give you information. Make it a two-way process.” Obama Appointee 4 described doing sophisticated economic analysis to prove why his policy was right and providing it to a top reporter. Obama Appointee 5 explained that “it starts with the relationship. You need to understand what a reporter is thinking, what other sources are telling them, and then figure out what to do: do you need to bring someone in to talk, [do you need a] third party validator, [do you need to] do research for them because we thought they didn’t understand it. So, it’s almost like we were doing their work for them. We would do anything we could to make it easier to get our point of view in their story.”

Bush appointees focused heavily on building relationships with and educating reporters about their worldview. “A lot of it was personal relationships, trying to build relationships with reporters so they knew the issues,” Bush Appointee 1 explained. “You got them interested in issues [so] they wanted to cover you, or it was as simple as, ‘I see you writing on this issue, you haven’t called us, come in and meet our Assistant Secretary’ or ‘we have a new person in our office you should get to know’ [and] have coffee, start a dialogue.” Bush Appointee 2 explained

the importance of “just making them understand the whole process” by explaining how and why things were being done. He used an example of a “roadshow” that Vice President Dick Cheney, Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson, and other administration officials took to every site in the country that was printing stimulus checks in 2008 in order to highlight for reporters how the process would work. Bush Appointee 3 explained briefing the press before trips by Treasury officials and following up afterwards to stimulate stories.

Bush Appointee 4 likewise focused on educating reporters. “It’s that Dale Carnegie stuff on how to win friends. Educate them. Don’t always call reporters when you need them, call when you don’t need them and help them do their jobs. Help them cultivate sources. None of that is sophisticated; it just means you have to do it every day.” He explained that “sophisticated is, like, doing some original research and presenting it ... [you] could give that exclusively, that kind of stuff” but he indicated that this would not be enough to generate “those hits” of larger press coverage. He also said “finding third parties to help influence a story also helps a lot.” Bush Appointee 5 said he could not remember, but said “I don’t think a lot of what we did was so sophisticated. A lot of what we did was trying to simplify things, because this stuff was so complicated.”

Civil Servant 1 explained that he would “try to understand what a reporter is after and counter-offer what we can do for them.” When reporters made an argument, he would also make counterarguments to defend his bureau’s position. Civil Servant 2 explained trying to find specific examples of people who have been helped by his bureau’s programs and giving those stories to reporters, and also pitching stories to reporters on why a new program of his bureau represented a particularly sophisticated approach. Civil Servant 3 likewise explained that when his bureau wanted reporters to cover a particular story, he would launch national campaigns and

“we’d bend over backwards to get them information and if they hadn’t done a story on this or that, we would call them and we always had a good relationship [and] ... we had people trained to work with reporters across the country to get the story out.”

Civil Servant 4 reported being particularly responsive by responding via email to questions from reporters as an event was happening. He also tracked the comments of reporters on Twitter and blogs during the event and let them know when they wrote things that were incorrect. Civil Servant 5 explained using messaging to make clear that the administration understood the needs and challenges of ordinary Americans and also using data to tell stories. Civil Servant 6 explained building relationships of trust with reporters which allowed him to share information on background or under embargo (meaning the reporter could not publish it until a specified future time), steering reporters to other sources, and providing exclusives to larger publications. Civil Servant 7 likewise described building relationships with reporters, pitching them stories, and giving them liberal access to his staff to help them write their stories.

Thus, the responses of the appointees and civil servants did not evince particular differences in their level of sophistication – evidence which is also germane to the question considered earlier of the relative efficacy of both groups. Neither group of officials described engaging in tactics of the permanent campaign, such as tailoring their messages in response to public opinion polls, or withholding or distorting information. To corroborate these findings, I also asked reporters about the most sophisticated strategies they witnessed both groups employ.

### *Reporters on the Savviest Strategies Government Spokespeople Use*

When asked about the savviest things federal economic agencies do to shape their coverage, the most striking thing about the responses of reporters is that the strategies they



described were likewise not particularly sophisticated or Machiavellian. All were variants on simply providing information to reporters. In the words of Reporter 5, the savviest strategy government officials employed was when they were “as open and forthcoming as possible about whatever issue [they were] confronting and ... [getting] the most competent people to talk to reporters, whether they’re appointees or civil servants, whoever knows the issue.”

Reporter 1 described the “savviest thing of all” as talking to reporters on background and off-the-record “so they [could] write more clearly” because they handle such complex issues. Reporter 6 likewise described such informal meetings as “most influential in shaping coverage” because it gave reporters a sense of how policy was being made and how the U.S. was prosecuting its interests around the world. Reporter 4 contrasted the Treasury negatively with the Federal Reserve in this regard, reporting that because the Federal Reserve sees itself as less political, officials there were much more willing to explain their thinking and decision-making processes on background, whereas “Treasury takes seriously the idea that they want you to look at the cupcake and not come into the kitchen.” He argued that while this approach does not always serve the Federal Reserve well on every story, in aggregate, the Federal Reserve benefits because their staff are able to shape the thinking of reporters.

For Reporters 2 and 3, the savviest strategy was to give exclusives to reporters. In the words of Reporter 2, the savviest strategy was to “generate buzz and force others to follow up when they think they will get a certain outcome from a certain outlet, because you’ve already shaped the narrative early on” or to “plant a story in a less prominent outlet to create the crumb that needs to be followed by someone else.”

Reporters 3 and 4 also described the savviest thing government officials did as simply providing access to the press. In the words of Reporter 4, “the agencies best at managing the

media tend to recognize we need to eat something, and if they serve us filling meals, then we're less likely to be hungry and wandering around looking for other things to eat." He described the public affairs office of the Federal Reserve as an example of spokespeople who "do a good job [of] providing information proactively and encouraging interactions with their officials, so you don't feel like you're on the outside trying to get in. You're getting a story, it's the one they've packaged for you, and they're occupying your attention."

Finally, as discussed in chapter 4, Reporter 7 emphasized the value of explaining issues to reporters early on in order to shaping their thinking, because, according to him, reporters will defer to the first version of events they hear, especially when they face deadline pressure.

Of course, as discussed in chapter 4, reporters were clear that Treasury officials did not generally provide them with the access they desired in ways that could have allowed the officials to better shape coverage. Rather, they described access as the most sophisticated technique they saw public affairs officers in economic agencies ever employ.

Thus, it seemed evident from the responses of both the appointees and civil servants that, while government officials might execute their work with sophistication, the particular strategies they used to influence media coverage were not extraordinary – and certainly did not include the permanent campaign tactics described by Blumenthal, Hecllo, and McClellan.

### **III. Appealing to the Emotions of the American People**

One of the tactics of the permanent campaign described by Blumenthal is playing on the emotions of the American people, as opposed to appealing to their reason. I therefore asked the appointees and civil servants I interviewed whether they ever attempted to appeal to the

emotions, as opposed to the reason, of the American people in the messages they crafted. The results of this question, as well as the following question on the use of public opinion polls, were also utilized as measures in my investigation of the relative efficacy of appointees and civil servants in chapter 4.

Although, as was discussed in the introduction, most citizens do not carefully follow the information released by the government, at the same time, it is important for the audiences which do follow the Treasury carefully to be able to accurately assess the state of the economy and work of the Department. These publics include investors who make decisions in part based upon information released by the Treasury and thought leaders, such as members of the media who heavily influence consumer perceptions of the economy. Of course, the Treasury might release sophisticated information for such audiences while targeting less-knowledgeable citizens with emotional appeals that could have positive effects (for example, by convincing American citizens to save more for their children's college educations or for retirement). On the other hand, it would be problematic if the Treasury appealed to unsophisticated consumers with self-serving messages. For example, if the Treasury attempted to bolster support for the president with emotional appeals projecting confidence in the economy but actual economic conditions were less rosy than the Department conveyed, this could cause consumers to make irresponsible decisions about their personal credit and spending.

Obama Appointees 2 and 4 indicated that they did not appeal to emotions; according to Obama Appointee 2, "I don't think I was, like, sophisticated enough to have thought of that." Obama Appointee 1 said he never "appealed in a demagogic way" but he was "aware of the emotional overlay of the way people consume news." Obama Appointee 3, by contrast, argued that "it's all emotion. In politics, reason doesn't get you anywhere. If there was reason, Social

Security would be different; all of my hopes and dreams would actually come true.” Likewise, Obama Appointee 5 indicated using emotion because “I think sometimes reason would be lost on them. If you can say, like, ‘remember what it was like to lose your house or watch your 401K disappear overnight or lose your job,’ those are things people can relate to. I don’t think it was trying to make them feel like crap, but to say, ‘these are the things we’re trying to prevent, we understand how hard it was and we don’t ever want it to happen again.’”

Bush Appointees 2, 3, and 4 likewise indicated that they did not appeal to emotions. Bush Appointee 2 explained that “we placed a premium on trying to be factual and accurate, especially considering we were dealing with a lot of numbers. Numbers don’t lie.” Bush Appointee 4 explained, “I think analytically.” However, two other Bush appointees indicated that they used emotional appeals for foreign audiences on issues such as terrorism and financial intelligence. In a response resonant of Obama Appointee 5, Bush Appointee 5 explained that, in communicating with the American people, he sometimes appealed to emotions as he was “trying to explain things in ways that people relate to. You have different ways of communicating to financial market professionals than ways of communicating to your mom and dad.”

Surprisingly, civil servants were much more likely than appointees to indicate that they attempted to appeal to the emotions of the American people. While Civil Servants 1 and 4 indicated that they did not do so (for Civil Servant 1, this was because “I tend to be a financial person who thinks of people in terms of logical reasons”), five of the seven civil servants indicated that they did in fact play to emotions. Civil servants indicated that at times they appealed to emotions because they were trying to convey how people could be impacted by very real financial threats to consumers, or why taking particular financial steps was important to the futures of Americans and their children. At other times, they did so because they felt that they

would be more successful at encouraging citizens to take action if they showed that they understood how Americans had been impacted by the financial crisis. One civil servant explained, “I always thought that was great; you felt like you were really helping the public.” At other times, they did so by using “success stories to pull the emotional string of the person reading the story but have it be enriched with real data so you can quantify how the [program] is making a difference.”

Surprisingly, then, civil servants were much more likely than appointees to practice this technique of Blumenthal’s “permanent campaign.” This interesting and counterintuitive finding might be attributable in part to the fact that civil servants were more likely to be responsible for communicating information targeted to consumers than appointees, who focused on portfolios such as tax policy and domestic finance and may have tended to work with more elite economic and financial reporters. Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of civil servants attempted to tap into emotions while conveying their messages suggests a level of sophistication and savvy among this group which also speaks to their efficacy. Of course, the reasons why both the appointees and civil servants explained that they sometimes used such appeals – to communicate in terms that the ordinary American could understand – also hardly feels like a threat to democracy. Although ultimately such efforts by appointees would likely have helped to build support for the president’s policies – and, by extension, the president – both groups appeared to do so in an effort to connect with the American people and explain policy rather than to overtly advance partisan agendas. I therefore did not judge such efforts to be evidence of a permanent campaign.

#### **IV. Use of Public Opinion Polls**

Of course, a key tactic of the permanent campaign as alleged by Hecló is using public opinion polls to craft messages designed to maximize public support for the president, even if this requires advocating policies which are damaging to the nation over the long term. I therefore asked the government officials whether and how they used public opinion polls in their work.

While McClellan acknowledged that the Bush administration sometimes governed based upon public opinion polls, the Treasury appointees indicated that the practice had not penetrated their department (2008). Obama and Bush appointees universally reported that they had never once commissioned a poll to guide their messaging. One Bush appointee did indicate, however, that the Treasury Chief of Staff Christopher Smith brought Republican pollster David Winston to the Treasury on more than one occasion to brief very senior Treasury officials on polling he had conducted on economic issues. Additionally, almost every appointee indicated that he was aware of polling reported in the media.

Obama Appointee 2 and Bush Appointee 3 both indicated that the thought never even crossed their minds to commission a poll. Bush Appointee 3 explained that “we’re not going to change our policy because of polls,” while Bush Appointee 2 explained that “whether explicit or implicit, we all knew from a Public Affairs standpoint where things were [in terms of public opinion] but I don’t think, at the end of the day, it influenced things much. TARP was hugely unpopular, but we continued to just do our job on that.”

Obama Appointees 1, 3, and 4 said that polling would happen more at the White House, while the Treasury’s “focus is on thought leaders” (Obama Appointee 4) and “in an agency you are less overtly political.” (Obama Appointee 1). Obama Appointee 3 indicated that it would not make sense to commission polls at Treasury about how to communicate with the American

people because “the things Treasury deals with are too complex; you’ve lost everybody.” (Of course this would not preclude possible benefits of conducting public opinion polls of key constituencies which follow Treasury issues, such as business leaders and investors, but the appointees indicated that they did not do so). Obama Appointee 5 indicated that he “sometimes would reference them in conversations with reporters ... more of like, ‘the American people want this done. Why won’t Congress do it?’”

Obama Appointee 5 and Bush Appointees 3 and 5 explained that the government simply did not have the resources to commission polls; Bush Appointee 3 indicated that it would not be a good use of resources even if the money were available. One appointee described a scenario in which banking trade associations would be “putting hundreds of thousands if not millions behind their campaigns [against Treasury efforts to regulate the industry, presumably by utilizing sophisticated polling] and we had people making fifty to 115 K that had to go up against that .... A team of four people at Treasury ... had to respond to that on top of everything else we were doing.”

Particularly surprisingly, while no appointee had ever commissioned a poll, the majority of civil servants had or were planning to conduct public opinion polling. One civil servant indicated that polls would not be relevant to the work of his bureau, and two other civil servants had never commissioned them. However, four of the seven civil servants had or were planning to commission such studies. One civil servant indicated that he had done so “often,” for many years. All of these polls focused or would focus on Treasury products, in order to determine whether consumers understood and liked them. One civil servant who held focus groups with consumers to test messages reported that he “was asked not to talk about that because the administration didn’t want it to look like we were polling or testing efficacy. I didn’t agree with

that, because it's pretty typical to test [marketing campaigns] and shows we were being responsible with our money."

Nevertheless, in a particularly fascinating and counterintuitive finding, while none of the appointees had ever used this central tool of the permanent campaign, a majority of civil servants were found to have done so. Of course, they did not do so to build support for the president or even for his policies, and therefore cannot be alleged to have actually conducted a "permanent campaign." Their use of such polls is, however, likely evidence of their efficacy and further indication that they approached their work with some degree of sophistication. Nevertheless, this second unexpected finding that civil servants are more likely to engage in the tactics which Blumenthal and Hecllo charged political campaign operatives with importing into government is striking.

## **V. Withholding Information Requested by Reporters**

Of course, perhaps the most disturbing depiction of the permanent campaign was McClellan's claim that government officials withhold and distort information requested by the press. I therefore first asked the government officials whether they believe it is ever appropriate for someone in their position to withhold information requested by the press. I then asked under what circumstances these actions would be appropriate, and whether this happened often or rarely in their work.

Obama Appointee 1 indicated that it was acceptable to withhold information for several reasons. He explained, "we were in a unique place at Treasury in that what we did was market sensitive, so there were certain instances in which providing certain information can influence markets in unpredictable ways." (Of course, other agencies, such as the Departments of Defense



and Agriculture also make announcements with market implications.) Like Bush Appointee 1, who, as previously discussed, had reported giving less time to reporters who he found to be irresponsible, Obama Appointee 1 likewise argued that it is “more justified to withhold or be less helpful to purely ideological outlets rather than people who are true journalists.” Obama Appointee 1 also indicated that it was acceptable to withhold information about Treasury actions that impact financial institutions.

Obama Appointee 1 was clear that “you might omit a data point ... you don’t want to make someone else’s case for them. Political communications is different from detached academic analysis in which you would have the responsibility to not omit relevant data points or factual assertions. You have a job to do, in terms of advancing a particular viewpoint. You shouldn’t view the job as a platonic ideal of searching for truth.” Later, when asked how he handled potentially damaging information, he explained that “you can sometimes be aggressively unhelpful to a reporter. If they are specifically writing something you think is unfair and don’t accurately present the truth, don’t think or feel an obligation to always be helpful.”

Obama Appointee 2 likewise argued that “you don’t have to tell the whole truth.” He indicated that “if there’s information I’m aware of that would result in a negative story, there’s no way I would make that available to a reporter,” and described withholding as “an unavoidable part of the job” that was a “regular occurrence, even in the sense that if a reporter doesn’t ask a question that I know the answer to, I’m not going to steer them in the direction of answering.” If a reporter did ask a question that Obama Appointee 2 did not wish to answer, he indicated, “I think the whole point is to do your best to tell the truth, but not the whole truth. You can stop at the point at which it will become damaging.”

Obama Appointee 3 concurred that “withholding is easy, you just don’t give it to them,

you point them somewhere else. They can't yell at you for omitting things." He explained, "I'm under no obligation to give out information unless it's, like, obviously in the public domain. If it's in a press release, you have to share. If it's not, you're under no obligation to do so." He indicated that he withheld information "regularly," explaining that "you're playing a game, at the end of the day. That's too simplistic, but you're always evaluating your options and constantly recalibrating." He also stipulated that "withholding when someone asked doesn't mean I didn't give it to someone else," indicating a willingness to selectively provide information based upon how he believed reporters would use it.

Obama Appointee 4 explained that withholding was acceptable "in a situation where it could potentially be a very damaging story, where there are numerous Congressional investigations and we're timing out the release of information, knowing that it will probably get out eventually, but holding while we figure out all the facts and a strategy." He indicated that this happened "occasionally – like, sometimes, not daily, but it's not rare, either."

Obama Appointee 5 explained that "that's kind of what the job is. I tried to be as upfront and transparent as I could, but I think there are legitimate times when it doesn't make sense to offer up everything you're thinking at that time prior to when a decision is made, things that could be market-moving events; there's times when you're not ready to talk about everything. I think good PR people are good at walking that fine line of never lying but just leaving out details to reporters' questions, answering truthfully and honestly but just making decisions about what's included in an answer and what will not be." He indicated that this happened "somewhat frequently, especially around really tense, difficult topics."

Bush Appointee 1 explained that withholding was "fine" because "you're trying to implement a strategy and showing all your cards at any given time is not the way to go about it."

He explained that “when reporters call and ask, ‘will you do X, Y or Z,’ I would say I would never speculate. Some would get mad later if [we] did, but ... yes, you are serving the people, but at some level you have to implement work, have a strategy, and get through it, and you can’t necessarily do that by having everything that goes on in the public domain.”

Bush Appointee 2 initially said it was appropriate to withhold information when “lives are at stake, it’s a sensitive or classified issue, that kind of genre,” but, when pressed, he indicated it was acceptable to withhold if “something was not primed for market, if it will be released but the reporter got a leak or inside track, I would not give that, confirm those numbers or give out accurate numbers until the situation was solidified that we were in a position to do so.” He indicated that such situations generally happened “rarely.”

Bush Appointee 3 likewise withheld, but “not too often.” He explained, “it’s a public affairs spokesperson’s job to guide a reporter in the right direction. Don’t lie, but it’s not their job to be open kimono and tell them everything. It’s a reporter’s job to get that information and there’s got to be a certain level of transparency, because you do have a relationship with this reporter, and that’s part of the trust with a reporter and, by larger extension, the public, but you don’t have to tell them everything. It’s on a need-to-know basis, but don’t send them in the wrong direction.”

Bush Appointee 4 indicated that “there are lots of times when it might be appropriate” to withhold information. He explained, “let’s say you know a person will be nominated for a job tomorrow. Just because you ask a question doesn’t mean it’s right for me to give the announcement today.” Obama Appointee 4 explained, “the term of art was, ‘I have nothing for you on that,’ but I would frequently say ‘I’ll let you know when we have something.’”

Bush Appointee 5 initially indicated “I don’t want to answer that,” but later explained

that, “no, of course you don’t have to tell a reporter everything they ask you.”

On the other hand, while most civil servants indicated that they would sometimes withhold information, it was clear that they were more likely to provide information requested by reporters when they could. In chapter 3, I explained that I was not previously acquainted with the civil servants who I interviewed and reached out to six of my seven civil service interview subjects without an introduction from a friend or colleague. Several other civil servants declined my request for interview. Thus, as described in the previous chapter, I consider it probable that my sample of civil servants is somewhat more likely than the average civil servant to be open and forthcoming with information, by virtue of the fact that they agreed to be interviewed for this project. Just as I believe that this could have over-represented civil servants who leak information in my sample, I likewise believe that this selection bias may have over-represented civil servants who eschew the withholding of information. Nevertheless, the views of civil servants were so similar, and so starkly different from those of appointees, that I consider it likely that they represent a true point of difference between the two groups, even if the responses of the civil servants who I interviewed may slightly overstate the degree of the difference.

Civil Servant 1 explained that “in terms of withholding, there’s often times when a reporter calls and asks, and I would say, ‘I have nothing to tell ‘ya right now.’” He indicated that this happens “rarely” at Treasury; asked under what circumstances it was appropriate, he indicated “rank has its privileges; if [a] Treasury [appointee] tells me not to say anything, I won’t.” However, it was clear that he was uncomfortable with this because, when asked if he shades the truth, he responded that “anytime I stick to just one statement ... in that sense, yeah, I guess I do. There’s too many times when I don’t tell the entire story to say I don’t shade the truth.”

Civil Servant 2 indicated that he would “rarely” simply not return a phone call in order to not provide information a reporter was requesting. Civil 3 likewise characterized such situations as rare, explaining that “97 or 98 percent of the time we’ll give reporters what they’re asking for if we have it or can get it for them correctly.” While he was clear that it is sometimes appropriate to withhold information “if you’re protecting the organization and you think it’s the right perspective to give on the situation,” his definition of when such circumstances are warranted seemed to be significantly narrower than that of appointees.

For example, Civil Servant 3 recounted the same story told by a different civil servant in chapter 5, in which Treasury appointees wanted to refer to a “technical error” and not share further information about an event with reporters, explaining that the appointees “wanted to shade the truth and we thought it would be better just to tell the whole truth and be done with it; it wasn’t that shocking. So they definitely shaded the truth.” In general, he explained, “if I have it and I know it, we will give it,” explaining that “there’s nothing that makes us look bad, I don’t think. It’s the way people could manipulate information that makes us look bad.”

Civil Servant 4 was more constrained by law than most other officials in what he could provide to reporters, and indicated that it was generally appropriate to share what was in the public record as opposed to the analysis, background and context often requested by reporters. He was clear that “I don’t always tell everything I know, but I don’t consider that shading the truth.” If Civil Servant 4 was most conservative, Civil Servant 5 was most liberal, explaining that “the only reason someone wouldn’t have gotten [information they requested] would have been if it was determined by FOIA. That decision would have been above my pay grade, determined by lawyers. In this day and age, you would probably have a blog written by reporters one second later saying you didn’t do it, so it’s probably not worth it.” However, he did indicate that “spin is

okay, to give the facts [and] still be truthful, but spin it a particular way.”

Civil Servant 6 explained that “usually the rules are pretty clear about ... what we can provide and what we can’t. Because we are less well known, I tend to be as transparent as possible, I try to provide as much [information] as I can, because I think it’s generally good for the [bureau].” He indicated that he therefore withheld information “rarely,” however he indicated that “shading” is acceptable in the sense that “I would like to direct reporters to the most positive part of every story and usually there’s a dark side to every story and I try to avoid [it] and try to anticipate the bad questions we’re going to get and try to avoid or steer to the more positive.”

Civil Servant 7, who I previously determined had leaked information to the press, was the sole government official who did not believe withholding information was appropriate. For him, “it has an impact on your integrity, and once you’ve compromised your integrity and people here have been covering the Treasury ... for fifteen, twenty years who know behind-the-scenes things, if they know you withheld information, you lose your integrity and you never get it back. Never. Or it’s a long road to hope.” Interestingly, Civil Servant 7’s standards in this regard were significantly higher than those of reporters themselves.

### *Reporters on Withholding*

To independently corroborate the responses of the government officials, I also asked reporters whether they became aware of practices which public affairs officials engaged in which they felt were inappropriate. If reporters did not respond by indicating that the officials had withheld information, I asked them directly whether they thought that the officials did so.

Very surprisingly, reporters seemed to accept the withholding of information from reporters by government officials as legitimate. For example, when I asked Reporter 7 whether it

was acceptable for government officials to withhold information, he responded, “yes, of course. It’s my job to ask the right questions, where you are put in a spot where either you have to answer or you have to be, like, ‘I can’t answer that.’ It’s my job to be smart about how I ask questions.” He used an example of a time when he had worked hard to understand how the Federal Reserve thinks about an issue “so that when they were working on a new issue I can work backwards from where I think they want to get, to figure out how they will get there, and in that circumstance I can ask their public affairs staff much more incisive questions, where even if they can’t answer me, I get the information I need.”

Reporter 6 indicated that he understood that sometimes it is not in the government’s interests to give reporters details of negotiations underway with other actors, for example. “I don’t think it’s their job to give us access to stuff that might hurt what they’re trying to do and I don’t resent them over that,” he said. “None of this information is critical to the functioning of the democratic process, but in terms of telling the story of how the U.S. responded to Europe’s [sovereign debt] crisis ... there’s so much more I’m sure they could have told.” The reporter indicated that, if he ever wanted a detail that the government was withholding badly enough, he could always find a way to get it from other sources who were involved. “If it felt like there was a good story there, I would push, push, push,” he said. “It depends how much time you want to invest. You can almost always get information if you figure in workarounds.”

Reporters even seemed to accept the withholding of information from one reporter when it was provided to another as legitimate, describing such a situation as merely frustrating as opposed to outrageously inappropriate. For example, Reporter 1 explained that “from time to time, I would get frustrated, I would have spoken with a civil servant or an appointee and I’d see something appear in another publication, and I’d say, ‘wait a second, you didn’t tell me that’ and

sometimes they'd say 'well, you didn't ask' or 'well, I didn't have it at that time.'" Reporter 2 even characterized situations in which he told a public affairs officer about a story he was working on and they gave it to another reporter who they thought would write the piece more sympathetically as "bad form but not outrageous." "If I've told someone information, they're free to do what they want with it," he explained. "But the consequence is that public affairs people have less time to respond to stories because of that risk and there are longer-term consequences. It's almost always the appointees who do this."

Reporters indicated that government spokespeople withheld information as a matter of course; Reporter 3 described withholding as "sort of like the main job" of government public affairs officers. "That's what they do: withholding information," he said. According to Reporter 2, "any public affairs official will share information beneficial to the interests of an administration and not draw attention to other information" but, again, "you can get some of that unfavorable information from other officials."

Reporter 2 indicated that "political certainly do it more than civil servants, but both do." Reporter 4 also judged civil servants to be somewhat less likely to withhold, explaining that "at times, a particular piece of information not advantageous to the agency is helpful in understanding what happened ... Civil servants are more likely to provide you with that kind of information." In a statement resonant of the responses of reporters to the question of whether government officials leak information, he explained:

It's not infrequently the case that, if I go to an agency and say, 'I want the following information, I know I can obtain it through FOIA [the Freedom of Information Act] but you have it in hand and it's easy to provide, let's skip that,' the odds that a civil servant



will give that are pretty decent. It works a fair amount of the time. The odds an appointee will be vanishingly small, even when the benefits to them would exceed the costs.

Appointees are really afraid to transact on the basis of damaging an agency in small ways, even if it might benefit the agency in the long term. They don't want to give out bad information, even if it might strengthen the relationship with me ... [and they could] capitalize on that down the road. That's not a trade most of them are willing to consider ... whereas there really are civil servants that will give you information; they'll just do it. They don't seem to do the calculus in the same way.

However, Reporter 5 indicated that he believed civil servants to ultimately be subjected to the same pressures as appointees, who are, after all, their bosses. "A lot of the forces that are driving the appointees are often driving the civil servants because the civil servants work for the appointees," he argued. "They don't want their agency to look bad even if they're civil servants, so they're often limiting the information they'll allow us to get about whatever subject we're interested in or trying to cover."

Thus, it is clear that both appointees and civil servants sometimes withhold information requested by the media. However, it is evident from the responses of both the government officials and reporters that civil servants seem to do so much more infrequently, while at least some appointees have no problem with withholding information simply for the reason that it will not make the administration look good. To be sure, as the government officials indicated, there will certainly be times when it is truly not appropriate to release information. While President Wilson, who disliked secret negotiations, called in his Fourteen Points statement for agreements that were "openly arrived at," the Constitutional Convention clearly set a precedent for the

government to engage in debates behind closed doors before making proposals open for public debate (1918). However, the descriptions of some of the appointees made clear that they made their decisions much more capriciously, at least sometimes withholding information purely in an effort to achieve partisan advantage.

Of course, as discussed in the Introduction, there are many legitimate reasons for the government to withhold information. Much of the Treasury's work gathering terrorism and financial intelligence, for example, is highly classified. In the case of the Treasury, judgments of when it is appropriate to withhold non-classified information are particularly difficult and subjective because the department possesses information which could cause short-term panic in global markets, but which also might point to risks which it is in the interests of the country to understand. This is because, as discussed in chapter 3, the strength of the economy depends in large part on confidence, which is heavily affected by statements and signals from the Treasury.

For example, Reporter 2 raised the possibility that U.S. Treasury officials and their global counterparts, in attempting to project optimism about Europe's current sovereign debt crisis in order to keep markets strong and avert greater spillover effects in the U.S. economy, are currently propping up a "house of cards" in Europe. They could be downplaying the current warning signals about the weakness of the European economy, setting up the U.S. to suffer much more gravely if Europe's economy ultimately collapses. The incentives for Treasury officials to attempt to calm and strengthen markets by withholding information or downplaying risk might be particularly strong in election years, since, as discussed in chapter 3, a president's re-election prospects are closely correlated with the economy.

A similar dynamic could help to explain why warning signs of the U.S. financial crisis in 2008 were not appreciated earlier. When I asked Bush Appointee 2 about this, he indicated that

the administration “could see things starting to bubble, but we never anticipated the extent to which everything would melt down.” However, he argued that the administration had incentives not to share warning signals with the public early on, because “from a Treasury-Fed perspective, you don’t want to be the cause of any significant ... market or economic situation. You don’t want to run into a crowded movie theatre and yell ‘fire’ and then you end up being wrong. You don’t want to say, ‘we’re concerned about this area,’ because then either you’re wrong, so your credibility overseeing the market is diminished, or there could have been problems but you’ve just accelerated that process [by panicking markets] and created a bigger issue for yourself than if you had kind of let it go its course.”

In other words, as a result of the ideational nature of the market, Treasury decisions to release any negative information could potentially inflict actual and serious harm on the nation’s economy – making it highly understandable, and on one hand good for the country, that Treasury officials take the cautious approach to providing reporters with access that was identified in chapter 4 and sometimes withhold information. On the other hand, as we have seen, withholding information might not serve the long-term interests of the nation in understanding the nature of extant economic threats. Furthermore, the responses of at least some of the appointees suggested that they considered it their prerogative to withhold information for reasons that go far beyond concerns about market stability. As Obama Appointee 1 explained, “you have a job to do, in terms of advancing a particular viewpoint.” This suggests that they may be withholding for purely political purposes, which raises serious questions in a democracy designed to allow citizens to pass informed judgment on their leaders.

Thus, at least some appointees appeared to be willing to withhold information for purposes not ostensibly justified by market stability or other legitimate aims – evincing the fact

that they may withhold information for partisan purposes, a classic component of the permanent campaign described by McClellan. To be sure, McClellan was clear that deception has always existed in politics; what is new is the larger volume of such deception today. The question of whether appointees are withholding more information than in the past is, however, outside of the scope of this study.

## **VI. Lying to the Press**

McClellan also describing lying as another tool of deception in the permanent campaign. I therefore asked the government officials whether they believed it is ever appropriate for someone in their position to shade the truth, what the circumstances would be, and whether this happened often or rarely in their work.

Nearly every appointee indicated that it was unacceptable to lie to reporters. Obama Appointee 1 indicated that “it’s always fair to present your case in the most forceful way possible, [but], as a spokesperson, there’s a definitive line you don’t cross, in that you don’t lie, you never lie. You do present your case in a tailored way, of course, but you should never straight out lie or mislead, partly for your own personal protection, because the reporters you deal with are going to be there for a long time afterward, and if they don’t trust you, you significantly hamper your way to do your job ... and for public interests.” He also described lying as “an unethical thing to do.”

The exception was Obama Appointee 4, who indicated that it was acceptable to “shade the truth,” but I judged his definition of shading to be more like spinning than lying, because when I asked when such shading would be appropriate, he gave the answer discussed in section 9, explaining a circumstance in which he knew information would eventually get out but he was

still gathering facts and determining strategy. (Obviously he could not lie if he knew the truth would eventually get out, because he would otherwise soon be exposed in the lie, nor could he lie about facts he did not yet know because he was still gathering them). However, appointees were otherwise clear that lying was unacceptable. In the words of Obama Appointee 3, “never shade the truth, because you’ll get found out.” Obama Appointee 5 explained, “the closest I’ve gotten and I assume most of us have gotten, is if a reporter asks you a question you do know the answer but you don’t feel at liberty to disclose it, to say, ‘I’m going to have to get back to you on that one’ and then maybe never get back to them, but not to say ‘we’ve never had a conversation on that,’ that would be something I’d never do, but I might say ‘I can’t have this conversation with you.’”

Bush Appointee 1 explained that it is “absolutely, absolutely wrong to ever lie.” Bush Appointee 5 added that not only is it “never appropriate to lie to a reporter,” but it was also never appropriate to “overtly mislead them.”

Like the appointees, civil servants stressed that it was never appropriate to lie to reporters. In the words of Civil Servant 1, “I’ve never been asked to say something I know is false, and I wouldn’t.” Or, as Civil Servant 5 put it, “I think there’s a difference between being truthful and not being truthful, and I don’t think it’s okay to not be truthful, and I don’t want to be on the record not being truthful, and I don’t think I ever was. Never.” Finally, Civil Servant 6 concurred that “the first rule is, don’t lie, and I think everybody in public affairs learns that. You can never lie, you can not confirm, you can do other things, but you just can’t lie.”

Thus, the government officials were adamant that they did not lie to reporters. However, the responses of the majority of reporters tell a different story.

## *Reporters on Lying*

To independently corroborate the responses of government officials on whether they ever lied to reporters, I used the responses of reporters to my question of whether they became aware of practices that public affairs appointees engaged in which they felt were inappropriate. If reporters did not respond by indicating that the officials had lied to them, I asked them directly whether they thought that the officials had done so.

Interestingly, reporters had widely divergent views of whether public affairs officials lie to them. Three reporters believed public affairs officials did not lie, one reported that it happened very rarely, and three believed they lied fairly frequently.

Reporters 1 and 6 did not believe that a government public affairs official had ever lied to them. For Reporter 1, “sometimes they would be adamant in presenting their position and somewhat unwilling to even concede there might be alternative viewpoints, but no one ever lied to me, that’s for sure, or if they did, I certainly didn’t know it.” Similarly, Reporter 6 indicated that he “can’t think of an instance in which anything anyone told me was outside the bounds of interpretation you’d take if you were in that person’s shoes, and the person on the other side had his fingers crossed, saying, ‘I hope he doesn’t realize what’s really going on.’” Reporter 5 indicated that government spokespeople engaged “more in just withholding information” and therefore they “may not ... outright lie, but by not telling me particular things they do know, the story I write is less factual, because I haven’t gotten the information.”

Reporter 7 indicated that, on average, once every two years a government public affairs official had engaged in a practice he would describe as untruthful, including a few cases where officials had “actively denied something they definitely knew was happening” or had

misrepresented the terms under which they were providing him with information he believed to be exclusive.

By contrast, Reporters 2, 3, and 4 believed that public affairs officers lied rather regularly, although Reporter 3's definition of "lying" was very similar to Reporter 5's definition of withholding. Reporter 3 indicated that often he would know from other sources that the Treasury was about to do something or a decision had already been made, but appointees would say that it was not final or complete because their definition of something being complete was when the press release was issued:

Sometimes it was not big stuff, so I'm giving you a mild one to make the point. The Secretary will travel to Chicago and I ask and they say nothing is final or complete, but it's bullshit, because it has been [finalized]. Two hours later, they put out the release announcing it. The decision was made [when he asked]. Is that lying? It's up to you, it's pretty damn close, but it's completely disingenuous, it's not honest, let's put it that way. Usually most of the time people who are speaking to press are careful not to say a technical lie, for fear it will come back. One, they could get caught and, two, it really can hurt their credibility, but you don't want to word something in such a precise way you're clearly lying, so [appointees] talk around it.

Reporters 2 and 4 were even clearer that the behavior of public affairs officers met the literal definition of lying. "I don't understand how you can survive in that role without shading the truth in some way, because if you were to simply stick to pure fact, everything you say would sound like it came out of a CBO [Congressional Budget Office] report," Reporter 2 said. When I

asked if he found such shading to be disingenuous, he answered affirmatively. “There’s no way someone can come up with a budget and claim they truly believe it will lead to a balanced budget in five years,” he argued. “In that case, they are lying. And it happens in both [Democratic and Republican] administrations.” He reported that he had had “many” such experiences.

Like Reporter 3, Reporter 2 also indicated that appointees, but not civil servants, would occasionally misdirect him and indicate that something was not going to happen shortly before it did actually happen. At times, this would be the case because the appointees did not know what was happening, and, at other times, it was deliberate. Sometimes, according to Reporter 2, appointees would do this so that they could release the information he had in a different publication. By contrast, he said civil servants would typically release information to all reporters at the same time.

Finally, while Reporter 4 indicated that he did not know how often civil servants working in public affairs had lied to him, it was “certainly not an uncommon experience” to be lied to by a political appointee, and it was “endemic” during the financial crisis:

It was not infrequent during the financial crisis that a public affairs official would assert or deny something, and it would turn out to be the opposite. I’m willing to accept [that] sometimes they were ignorant and, in good faith, telling what they knew or concealing a fact they didn’t know, but ... Not infrequently, they were willfully attempting to mislead and steer away from stories and alter coverage not just by arguing for an interpretation but by representing that there were facts I needed to consider even when those details were not true.



Reporter 4 indicated that his news organization came to distrust the Treasury and the Federal Reserve so deeply that, while his media outlet would still report what officials said on the record, they would no longer believe officials who told them off the record that they were wrong. “Whereas, at the beginning of the crisis, we would have given significant pause to moving forward if Treasury or the Fed said ‘you’re headed in the wrong direction,’ we simply wouldn’t accept it from Treasury or the Fed, because we had been lied to too often,” he said. Reporter 4, who reported for a media outlet popularly viewed as liberal, indicated that “some of the worst lies” were told under the Bush administration at the start of the financial crisis, and while there was an initial “honeymoon” period under the Obama administration, “in time, we reached the same conclusion. There was a fundamental problem of trust.” (The government, of course, faced the same problem of lack of media trust during the Vietnam war, when military briefings came to be referred to by reporters as the “five o’clock follies.”) (Connable, 7).

Reporter 4 indicated that the problem had diminished simply because the crisis has receded and there is less “context of crisis or new policies moving forward.” He indicated that such outright lying seemed to be less prevalent among civil servants, because “they are willing to say a lot less; the degree of dialogue is very different. They tend not to be players in the great game in the same way. Not that it never happens, but it’s less frequent, because of both their means and [their] motive.”

It therefore appears that about half the reporters who cover the Treasury seem satisfied with the ethics of the government spokespeople with whom they work. Reporter 6, for example, described a “real sensitivity to the ethics rules” among both appointees and civil servants, “to the point where people wouldn’t even let you buy them a coffee.” He emphasized that there were no attempts at “trading access, [such as suggestions that] ‘we could get you this access to this

person, but you have to guarantee the story will look this way.” But especially for Reporter 4, and to an important extent for Reporter 3 and a significant extent for Reporter 2, the information they received from government spokespeople was often not to be trusted, and they were much more likely to blame appointees than civil servants for lying.

This suggests that, contrary to the claims of the government officials, appointees may in fact sometimes engage in the mistruths that McClellan described as being part of the permanent campaign in government.

## **VII. Lying to Make the President Look Good**

As a further test of the presence of a permanent campaign, I asked the government officials whether they believed that it would be possible for someone else holding their position to tell untruths to make the president look good, and whether they or their colleagues had ever attempted to do so.

Bush Appointee 5 claimed not to know, and one Obama appointee and one Bush appointee believed that this would not be possible. Otherwise, all of the appointees believed that it would, in fact, be possible for a Treasury spokesperson to do so. In the words of Bush Appointee 4, “yeah, I guess it’s absolutely possible for people to lie to the press without getting found out, because some people are really good at lying and unethical.” However, many appointees acknowledged that the repercussions could be severe because, as Obama Appointee 1 explained, “you run the risk of getting caught if the truth comes out later.” Bush Appointee 2 explained that “as a spokesperson, your job is built on trust, trust of the people that work with you and [of the] reporters you interact with, and once you cross that barrier and give out false

information, that trust is ruined, and you're no longer capable of effectively doing your job.”

Obama Appointee 2 used the example of when State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters in July 2013 that Secretary of State John Kerry was not on his boat in Nantucket as a crisis unfolded in Egypt, and photographs later emerged of Kerry on his boat. Obama

Appointee 3 indicated that a Treasury spokesperson could lie “very easily” but indicated it would be “harder about the President,” while Obama Appointee 5 predicted that a spokesperson could lose their job for doing so. Bush Appointee 3 likewise argued, “it’s D.C., this kind of crap happens all the time, but I think that person should be held accountable.”

Obama Appointee 4 indicated that it would not be possible, because “I don’t think you’d be able to get through the level of clearance you’d be required to get through to put out something, because Treasury is a ... building that prides itself on putting out good facts.” Obama Appointee 4 indicated that reporters had told him that Treasury does not put out the kind of “spin” they get from the White House. Later in the conversation, he explained, for example, that a Treasury spokesperson had refused to go along with a White House attempt to claim that the country had recouped all of the money it lent to General Motors under President Obama but not under President Bush – a claim that was “ridiculous” and “stupid.”

While all of the Obama appointees indicated that their Treasury colleagues had never made such an attempt to lie for the President, several of the appointees volunteered that they suspected others in the administration of doing so. Like Bush Appointee 3, who said these things happened frequently in Washington, Obama Appointee 4 indicated that “there were certain things said by the White House that were not technically true, on numerous occasions, regarding one of the President’s signature initiatives.” Bush Appointee 4 said “there are people who think

lying is part of the job – some people in other parts of the administration.” Bush Appointee 1 told me to “call [the Department of] State, they would have done anything to make Bush look good.”

Most of the seven civil servants believed that it would be possible to lie for the president, though all indicated that they had never done so and were not aware of instances in which colleagues had done so. Civil Servant 1 believed that it was possible and that “political... do it all the time.” Civil Servant 4 concurred that “anything’s possible,” while Civil Servant 5 concurred, “as long as they never got caught.” Likewise, Civil Servant 6, using the example of Lara Logan’s interview on CBS’s “60 Minutes” with a security contractor who falsely claimed to have been present during the attack on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi, Libya, explained that “anytime anyone has access to a reporter, they can tell whatever they want and if they can back it up enough, then it’ll get written about ... it’s just a matter of relationships, you can get away with it.” Civil Servant 7 initially said it would not be possible, but was later able to envision a scenario in which his boss met the president and he shared what the president said. Although Civil Servant 7 had previously admitted to leaking during our interview, he indicated that in such a circumstance, “my attitude is, that’s a personal conversation [between his boss and the president] and I have no business” sharing it.

Two of the civil servants indicated that it would not be possible to lie for the president. Civil Servant 2 explained that “we hardly ever deal with anything related to the president as far as the press. We definitely support what the president is trying to do from an economic standpoint, but if someone is looking for comment such as that, they go to [the appointees at] main Treasury.” Civil Servant 3 explained, “we’re not in the business of trying to make people look good; we’re just trying to do our jobs.”

These responses call into question the claims of government officials that they had never lied to the press – claims which were disputed by most reporters. Here, the majority of both appointees and civil servants indicated that it would be possible to lie for the president. While they all claimed to have never done so, interestingly, appointees in both administrations indicated that they had knowledge that their colleagues had done so. Thus, while the particular appointees who I interviewed may have never personally lied to the press, it is evident that appointees under both administrations did so – although unclear whether these appointees were in government agencies and/or the White House.

### **VIII. Crafting Narratives**

Next, in an effort to determine how the government officials attempted to shape the information they provided to reporters to their advantage, I asked them what percentage of the messages they sought to promulgate they would describe as ideas (like ways of viewing particular things) and narratives, as well as how they developed and sculpted narratives to make their points. This measure was designed to determine whether they ever distorted information in the process.

Most appointees indicated that narratives and ideas were very important. Obama Appointee 1 explained that “virtually everything presented you try to shape with some aspect of narrative. There are very few points where it’s a pure data point divorced from any context or narrative.” Obama Appointee 2 would say to reporters, “here’s our idea and here are the facts to back it up,” and Obama Appointee 5 likewise explained that he would share “both a story and a fact.” Obama Appointee 3 explained, “you’ve got to put everything in context ... putting it in a

way people understand ... matters more than anything else.” The Obama appointees’ estimates of how much of the information they shared consisted of ideas and narratives (as opposed to straight facts such as numbers) included under fifty percent (which I counted as 49 percent) and “virtually everything” (which I counted as 99 percent), for an average of 53.1 percent.

With the exception of Bush Appointee 5, who declared that he could not remember before I had an opportunity finish asking the question aloud, the responses of the Bush appointees were broadly similar. They estimated that, on average, 48.75 percent of their messages consisted of ideas and narratives. Bush Appointee 1 explained that he “split my time between almost acting as a data processor for reporters calling with generic questions they need answers to, versus getting out there and doing more suasion through ‘here’s what we believe and think, here’s our goal in all of this.’”

Appointees varied in the tactics they used to develop and sculpt narratives to make their points. Obama Appointee 1 explained that the way to sculpt narratives is to “make announcements which are colored with your message, infused with your message, make an announcement you did [X], which is a natural news hook, but infuse it with quotes and other surrounding information which makes a case for why the actions you took were correct, so each news hook is an opportunity to infuse your [messages].” Obama Appointee 4 explained, “we looked for one-off stories to show how [an outcome they opposed] was bad, tried to find points in the data we could present to folks.” Obama Appointee 5 explained that “a small group would have a conversation about what we thought a good story would be and how to tell the story and then develop tactics, like write a press release, write a fact sheet or blog post, find a real person validator, put someone else in the administration on the phone, [think about] who are the best spokespeople for this, and, of course, do we want to do background, on the record, whatever, and

it would vary from issue to issue, but there were a whole slew of tactics. We could write an op-ed ... what would reporters be open to or find most useful on the issues?”

Bush Appointee 4 explained that, to sculpt narratives, he “thought of a reasonable person in my head and [would] tell a story ... and include hard, presentable facts [and] good analysis.” Bush Appointee 1 likewise explained that “usually some person would come up with a good narrative or example, let’s say ... that helps to explain the issue [we were] working on ... It’s usually very helpful to reporters to have a common sense example. It started out as a team effort; I would take notes.” Bush Appointee 2 explained that sculpting narratives required “obviously always keeping the administration’s position overall in line and trying to put it in the context of what will support economic growth and job creation.”

The percent of messages promulgated by civil servants that were ideas or narratives ranged from zero to “almost all” (which I counted as ninety-nine percent in my calculation), for an average of nearly forty-three percent. However, Civil Servant 1, who replied “almost all,” clarified that “it’s almost all narratives, meaning ‘here’s the story without interpretation.’” This may have therefore overrepresented the amount of actual narrative in the average, since I considered narratives to generally include interpretation and believe the other civil servants did, as well.

To sculpt his narratives, Civil Servant 1 explained that he would approach his principals, “asking them, ‘what would you like the newspaper to say about you, if you could write the story?’” For Civil Servant 2, it was about looking “for end beneficiaries, real life stories,” a strategy also echoed by Civil Servant 5. Civil Servant 3 would “write the best press releases we can. Factual, to the point, here’s what we do, here’s the benefit to the public, [here’s] why we want the public to do what we want them to do.” Similarly, Civil Servant 6 would “build

narratives around the trends and patterns” in data. Civil Servant 4 would add context based upon his bureau’s previous work. Civil Servant 7 would put his bureau’s work in the context of the “traditions and values of the country.”

The descriptions of both groups regarding their work generally did not evince permanent campaign tactics. For example, with the exception of Bush Appointee 2, none of the government officials indicated that they sculpted narratives by considering what would work to the president’s advantage or what the American people wanted to hear. Many made clear, by contrast, that their messages were ultimately grounded in facts. Of course, their descriptions do not definitively prove that they did not engage in permanent campaign tactics which they chose not to share in these descriptions of their work, but they were generally not evident in my discussions of this question with the government officials. The fact that nearly as much information released by civil servants consisted of ideas and narratives in comparison with their appointee counterparts also suggests a perhaps unappreciated degree of sophistication among the careerists.

## **VIX. How the Government Officials Handled Damaging Information**

In a final attempt to measure permanent campaign tactics, I asked the government officials how their offices determined how to handle information that was potentially damaging or embarrassing. Nearly every official indicated that they began preparing immediately for the release of the information. An exception to this was Bush Appointee 5, who first indicated “we had meetings” and then changed his story and stated with a straight face that, during his time as a spokesperson for the Treasury during the height of the nation’s financial crisis, he had never had to handle negative information.



The other Treasury spokespeople generally began preparing for the information to come out. They believed that even classified information might leak; one Bush appointee recounted how a Treasury official spent three years preparing for information to leak on a top-secret Treasury initiative tracking the finances of potential terrorists by using data from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT). In Juan Zarate's account of this incident in *Treasury's War*, he explained that when the highly-sensitive and classified operation finally leaked to the press, the Treasury's top public affairs appointee, Tony Fratto, "was surprised it had taken so long." (2013, 269).

Appointees differed in their views of whether the release of sensitive or damaging information was inevitable. Obama Appointee 2 explained, "I don't think we have power in those positions to stop negative stories from coming" out. However, Obama Appointee 1 explained that, if it was judged likely a story would go public, it often made sense to release it preemptively. To do this, a spokesperson would "just release it yourself ... with the, spin is a loaded word, but its ... best face or argument attached, so the first way someone counters it is accompanied by your message." At other times, "if you think you can continue to avoid a story, you might take that chance and hope it doesn't detonate." Obama Appointee 4 concurred that "if there was something terrible, we wouldn't necessarily release it ourselves, but prepare, assuming it will come out." However, Obama Appointee 1 explained that "often you get out in front, because if it detonates unexpectedly in ways you don't expect or understand, that's a much higher risk, particularly in an election year."

Interestingly, when asked how they would handle damaging information, three of the seven civil servants indicated that would confer with Treasury appointees, while a fourth civil servant indicated that he would confer "up the chain of command" within his own bureau. Civil

Servant 3 explained, “we will always seek guidance from the political public affairs staff and see how they want to handle it, and follow what they say to do. I would never say something they didn’t want us to say.” Civil Servant 2 indicated that he would approach Treasury public affairs appointees with a recommended course of action.

The other three civil servants indicated that they would release the information. “In my experience,” Civil Servant 5 explained, “the way the administration always starts is with a plant. Give it exclusively to one reporter to get the story out in a way they think will be more favorable, or at least more fair.” Likewise, Civil Servant 6 explained, “usually the best tactic is to get everything out as soon as you can. It’s worse to have the story bleed out than to at least get some credit for being transparent and honest and as open as possible.” Civil Servant 7 also indicated that “we’re full disclosure, if we have problems ... we tell the truth,” although, when pressed, he explained that “we don’t go out and say, ‘guess what happened?’ but if they ask the question, absolutely.”

Two of my interview subjects who were familiar with the 2013 scandal in which the IRS was accused of conducting politically motivated investigations into organizations which applied for tax-exempt status recounted the incident in a way that suggests that the strategy of preemptive release has become such an article of faith among spokespeople that they sometimes do so even when it may not serve the interests of their organizations. In this instance, with an Inspector General preparing to release a report requested by Congress into the matter, Lois Lerner, Director of the IRS Exempt Organizations division, decided to proactively announce the allegations against her agency publicly.

One appointee made clear that Lerner did so against the advice of Treasury public affairs appointees, who had advised the IRS repeatedly that it would be better to wait for the Inspector

General's report, which exonerated the agency. While the final discussions prior to Lerner's announcement happened among more senior administration officials who did not work in public affairs, it is interesting that the Treasury public affairs appointees were aware that Lerner would speak publicly and tried to deter this action numerous times, but ultimately did not prevent her from doing so. One appointee told me that this was the case because Treasury "still wanted them to be their own agency" and therefore "would just strongly discourage or strongly encourage." On the one hand, this suggests that appointees ultimately exert less control than we might expect over the actions of career staff; on the other hand, the situation was so damaging to the president's reputation that it seems reasonable to suggest that appointees might have learned a lesson and be even more assertive with their bureaus in the future.

Additionally, the incident illustrates how the interests of appointees and civil servants will not always align. One appointee was clear that, during the IRS scandal, Treasury appointees tried to direct blame towards the IRS as opposed to the administration, though he argued this was warranted because "I mean, they just really, really fucked up." This was not the only example of such conflicts. An appointee also described how, during the 2013 government shutdown, a Treasury bureau wanted to avoid highlighting the fact that citizens could not access its services, while appointees "loved those stories because we were like, 'see, this is awful,' so there were a few occasions like that and times when agencies were used as a scapegoat ... a little bit 'cause it was politically advantageous." However, this appointee emphasized that "generally, like, you try to protect your bureaus, even if they don't think you're trying to help them."

I judged another example of this practice of pre-emptive release of negative information, this time shared by a Bush appointee, to be one of the most ethically questionable tactics of which I learned in this project. A Bush appointee described how, as discussed above, the *New*

*York Times* learned that the administration was tracking financial transactions through SWIFT as part of its anti-terror efforts, without obtaining Congressional approval or individual warrants or subpoenas. The appointee indicated that Treasury public affairs appointees and attorneys worked for months with the *Times* to convince the paper that the practice was legal and that they should not run the story because it would jeopardize their counter-terrorism efforts. The appointee familiar with this incident believed the *Times* was publishing it “just to be assholes, frankly.” When the Bush administration learned that the paper had decided to move ahead with the story, they gave the story to the *Wall Street Journal* in an effort to achieve more favorable coverage. The appointee indicated that the decision to give the story to the *Journal* was personally approved by President Bush, making it clear that it was not undertaken lightly.

I nevertheless considered the practice to be ethically questionable, since the *Times* had clearly invested significant staff time and expense in order to obtain the story. The story published by the *Times* indicated that they had interviewed “nearly twenty current and former government officials and industry executives.” (Lichtblau and Risen 2006). A subsequent letter by *Times* Managing Editor Bill Keller evinced the extent of the work the paper had invested in the piece, explaining that “our decision to publish the story of the Administration’s penetration of the international banking system followed weeks of discussion between Administration officials and The Times, not only the reporters who wrote the story but senior editors, including me. We listened patiently and attentively. We discussed the matter extensively within the paper. We spoke to others – national security experts not serving in the Administration – for their counsel.” Furthermore, Zarate, who served as deputy national security adviser during the incident, wrote that he believed that the Times “thought they had found another ... program worthy of ... perhaps another Pulitzer prize.” (2013, 272). Reporters build their careers and

media organizations earn their reputations and revenue in part through such enterprise journalism. In this sense, it appears unjust for appointees to take the work of one company and give it for free to another company which it prefers on a partisan basis – although in this case the Bush administration likely felt justified in undertaking such strong-arm tactics by their belief that the *Times*' decision to publish the story was politically motivated and endangered the nation. As previously discussed, more than one reporter indicated that government public affairs officials will do this. However, while I consider this tactic to generally be wrong, it does not fall under my definition of the permanent campaign.

In general, however, while many of the government officials indicated that they often released damaging information because they believed it was in the best interests of their offices to do so on their own terms, it was also clear that appointees sometimes withheld this information and hoped the media would not uncover it. Of course, since nearly all of the civil servants indicated they would either defer to Treasury public affairs appointees or release the information (with the exception of a single civil servant who would elevate the issue within his bureau, which has political leadership), it appeared that this practice of withholding damaging information was practiced mainly by appointees. To be sure, it is unsurprising that any individual or organization might not wish to proactively promote information that sullies their reputation. Indeed, what is perhaps most remarkable is the major proclivity of Treasury spokespeople to preemptively release such information. Nevertheless, the responses also offered some evidence of withholding by appointees – a central component of McClellan's permanent campaign.

### **Possible Causal Factors**

As expected, there was little difference in the degree to which the appointees and civil servants engaged in the tactics of the permanent campaign (although appointees were significantly more likely to withhold information from the press). This section will next consider whether, as hypothesized, the reason that appointees did not engage in more permanent campaign tactics was because their large workloads precluded them from doing so. I then explore whether or not the government officials were motivated by the goal of the permanent campaign, which is to build support for the president. Finally, I will consider whether those officials who studied journalism in school were less willing to withhold or manipulate information requested by the press.

## **I. Workloads**

I next sought to determine whether the reason why appointees did not practice most permanent campaign tactics was because they lacked the time to do so. This data in this section, and the following section on how the officials allocated their time, was also considered as a possible causal factor for the relative efficacy of appointees and civil servants in chapter 4. I first asked the government officials whether their workloads were reasonable. Although I asked this as a serious question, many of the appointees responded by laughing, because the suggestion that their workload might be manageable was such an outlandish proposition for them.

As Obama Appointee 2 explained, “from the day you signed on, to the day you left, you were never not on the clock. Not to complain about it, because I enjoyed it, but it’s not reasonable, it’s not normal.” Obama Appointee 3 concurred, “I enjoyed it, but it was insane. Absolutely insane.” Sharing gossip about a senior administration communications official who he heard had just been quietly hospitalized, not for the first time, he argued, “it’s scary in this

administration. Scary.” He explained that he, too, was “totally frayed by the end ... It’s hard to drink from a fire hose and learn at the same time. That I found the most difficult part.” Obama Appointee 5 explained that there were “times where it felt like I couldn’t breathe because I couldn’t figure out what to do next.” He explained that he would “work weekends, until the minute you close your eyes at night until you pick up your Blackberry at 6 a.m. and start” and that because such overtime was never compensated, the work was “half volunteer, but it does great things for our careers and its exciting work.” Obama Appointee 4 explained that his portfolio “was so broad that ... there were all kinds of things that you could focus on, that oftentimes it was overwhelming.”

Bush Appointee 1 explained, “in government you worked your butt off all the time” and he was “crazy busy, but also look at what you are doing.” One Bush appointee also reported that he found his present, demanding position with a major Wall Street firm to be “normal” in comparison. Bush Appointee 2 compared his “normal workload” of twelve to thirteen hour days before the financial crisis favorably with his work during the crisis, because beforehand “it was nothing where I was going too out of my mind.” Bush Appointee 3 explained that “I loved the job ... there’s very high expectations and you don’t really have an option, because you’re there to work your tail off.” Later, when I asked him whether he or his colleagues had ever attempted to tell untruths to make the president look good, he explained that he did not “have much time to think about [doing] that” in his job.

While the civil servants likewise generally described their jobs as demanding, it was evident that they were not working around the clock or finding their jobs to be “insane” or causing “scary” personal problems. Civil Servant 1 explained that he generally stopped checking his Blackberry at 7:00 pm on weeknights; Civil Servant 3 explained that he “probably put in nine

or ten hours a day, but I know there are public affairs people who work twelve hours a day; I'm just not willing to do that anymore." Civil Servant 4 described his workload as "reasonable; it's manageable;" Civil Servant 6 explained that his workload was reasonable because his policy portfolio was "pretty narrow" and therefore "I rarely work weekends or need to respond then ... and I'm usually home by 6:30 or seven and rarely respond in the evening," with no early mornings, either. Civil Servant 7 explained that "it's a lot less intense of an environment here" than in his previous public affairs positions.

It seemed clear from these responses that civil servants were generally hardworking, but the workloads of appointees were of a very different order. Of course, appointees generally indicated that they loved and were happy to be doing their jobs; one appointee in particular who later went on to another post considered very enviable in his field described his time at Treasury as "one of the happiest times of my life." Nevertheless, the responses of appointees made it clear that their workloads were, at least at times, unmanageable. As discussed in chapter 5, Obama Appointee 3 also indicated he did not have time to think, while Obama Appointee 5 described executing strategies requested by his superiors against his better judgment because, "in this job, you're so exhausted and there's so much to do, that you just want to move on." (While proclaiming to work long hours is often a point of pride and even an assertion of one's importance in Washington, D.C., the appointees often indicated that they found their workloads to be too large to reasonably manage – a claim which I would not expect to be driven by pride.)

To further investigate my hypothesis that the massive workloads of appointees precluded them from engaging in a permanent campaign, I next asked the government officials to estimate how they spent their time.



## **II. Time Spent Pitching, Responding, and Crafting Strategy**

For insight into how they spent their time and another measure of the capacity of the individuals to engage in the proactive tactics of the permanent campaign, I asked the government officials how much of their time they spent pitching stories to reporters, how much time they spent responding to inquiries from reporters, and how much time they spent crafting and implementing strategies to attain desired coverage. (I indicated to my interview subjects that I did not necessarily expect their percentages to add up to one hundred, since I realized that they might also do other things with their time).

The average Obama appointee estimated that he spent just seventeen percent of his time pitching stories. While Bush Appointee 5 could not recall how much time he spent on any of these activities, the other Bush appointees estimated that they spent on average twenty-four percent of their time pitching stories to press, a number skewed upwards by one appointee whose policy portfolio was new and therefore indicated that he needed to spend more time pitching. Obama appointees on average reported spending fifty-three percent of their time responding to reporters' inquiries and thirty-one percent of their time crafting strategies to achieve desired coverage. Bush appointees on average estimated that they spent 37.5 percent of their time responding to reporters and twenty-five percent of their time crafting and implementing strategy. Civil servants spent on average nine percent of their time pitching stories, twenty-eight percent of their time responding to media inquiries, and thirty percent of their time crafting and implementing strategy. These numbers are skewed downwards by a civil servant who had numerous other responsibilities and therefore spent only about eighteen percent of his time on media relations. (See chapter 4, table 1).

As previously discussed, Obama Appointee 4 explained that his portfolio “was so broad

that ... there were all kinds of things that you could focus on, that oftentimes it was overwhelming, plus we rarely even got to do any of the proactive stuff on this because so much of what I dealt with was incoming questions from reporters.” Obama Appointee 5 concurred that “this is probably a shortfall of the department – there was very little time spent thinking about proactive stories.” He explained that “we don’t have resources to be creative. We don’t have time to talk about things different from what’s happening during the day. There’s a job to do, it’s a terribly difficult one; you just have to focus on doing it and not screwing up. There’s no time to do anything else and no resources.” Obama Appointee 1 also indicated that “we didn’t do enough pitching,” while Obama Appointee 2 explained, “a lot of it was so reactive ... there’s just so much incoming” and Obama Appointee 3 explained, “I played a lot of defense.”

Bush Appointee 1 likewise explained that “you want to say [that] being proactive is ninety percent of the job, but it isn’t. You’re trying to keep your head above water in that job. You just have very little time in the day left to say, ‘let’s get proactive, who should we call?’ At the end of the day, it’s what you have the least time for.”

Civil Servant 1 explained that he did almost no pitching because every time he suggested it, the idea was shot down by his civil service superiors; “it may be a civil service mentality, they don’t feel like we want to push anything, we’re happy to respond but don’t see that as our job to push an issue.” He did indicate, however, that Treasury appointees made major announcements on behalf of his bureau and that they sometimes utilized outside contractors for promotional purposes, who pitched stories. The actual strategy he described using when his agency did pitch stories, however, was particularly sophisticated. He explained that he used a platform which employs Boolean logic to target reporters across the nation who have previously reported on similar topics and therefore might be most interested in writing about his programs.

In sum, appointees claim to have spent, very roughly, 45.25 percent of their time responding to reporters. This still seemingly left the majority of their time to act proactively. They spent 20.5 percent of their time pitching stories and twenty-eight percent of their time pursuing proactive strategies, seemingly leaving time for them to engage in permanent campaign tactics. By contrast, despite their more manageable workloads, civil servants spent less time responding to media inquiries (twenty-eight percent of their time) and significantly less time pitching (just nine percent of their time), however they spent slightly more of their time crafting and implementing strategy (thirty percent of their time). Of course, these estimates are rough; nevertheless, despite the at times “overwhelming” amount of work appointees faced, it appears that opportunities nevertheless remained to implement the permanent campaign. Therefore, my hypothesis that the massive workloads of appointees precluded them from engaging in a permanent campaign was not proven.

### **III. End Goals of their Work**

To assess their motivations and to what degree they were focused on the goal of the permanent campaign, which is to build public support for the president, I first asked the appointees and civil servants to describe the ultimate goals of their work and what they were trying to achieve each day. Both the Obama and Bush appointees were clear that key goals were to inform the people about their work and to promote the work of the administration for which they served, while civil servants generally reported that they informed the people and promoted the bureaus for which they served.

Obama Appointee 1 explained that his goal was “making sure the public was informed about the work of the agency but also advancing the administration and president I believed in.”

For Obama Appointee 2, “the ultimate goals were definitely to preserve a favorable opinion on what we were doing – to communicate but to do it in a favorable way.” Obama Appointee 4 said “the ultimate goal was twofold, especially given the time period ... First, to defend the administration’s response to the Great Recession and, second, to show how the administration’s economic policies were best for our economy and our nation.” Obama Appointee 5 explained that he pursued twin goals of “trying to explain in plain English” what the Treasury was doing and “to dispel all the myths, rumors and misinformation out there on a lot of the initiatives.”

However, later in our conversation, Obama Appointee 5 explained that “there is no sophistication, no targeting, no message testing, but in the end, your goal is to not fuck up. There were times we could see the splash ad in the re-elect [campaign] and that was something we were very conscious of avoiding: could this have a negative impact in the next campaign? Everyone just wants to avoid that and Republicans want to find it. Civil servants have never thought that way, but no appointee didn’t think a number of times, ‘is this going to be used against the president?’”

The responses of the Bush appointees were very similar. Bush Appointee 1 explained that his goals were to “educate, inform, and support the administration.” Bush Appointee 4 explained that “I thought about just faithfully representing the views of the administration. That was really important. The second part, really ... is education. I always thought we had an obligation to try to educate, [but] if I’m being honest, one came first, [and] education second, but it was really important.”

Civil servants, by contrast, described their goals as being to inform the people and, often, to present their bureaus favorably. Civil Servant 1 explained that his job was to explain “here’s what we do, here’s why we do it.” While he explained that “the big thing, ideally [what] I want

people to understand [is] what we do,” he added that he also had a “wish list: I would really like people to understand the commitment in my organization to good government, to trying to do the best they can all the time, finding better ways to do things. In the civil service, there are so many people committed to doing things better, regardless of political leanings.” Later in our conversation, he explained that “I don’t think, for me, it’s ever appropriate to try to help or hurt an administration.”

Civil Servant 2 explained that his ultimate goal was to help people understand the work his bureau was doing, but “underneath that would be the message” about why his work was the right thing to do. Civil Servant 4 explained his end goals as “very bland: to educate and inform about the agency’s mission and activities.” Civil Servant 6 indicated “we’re trying to make sure that my agency is represented fairly, perceived fairly, and the work it does on behalf of the American people is recognized in a positive way.”

In this sense, like the political appointees, the civil servants were not only attempting to inform the American people about their work, but also to convince them why their work made sense and to build support for the government. The only difference, then, was that civil servants were trying to burnish the images of their bureaus, while appointees focused on the president and the administration’s partisan goals. Nevertheless, because the president is responsible for the functioning of the entire government, the efforts of civil servants to promote the good work of their bureaus clearly stood to ultimately redound to the chief executive’s benefit. Ultimately, however, it appeared from these responses that appointees, but not civil servants, shared the goal of the permanent campaign: building public support for the president, despite the fact that they did not largely avail themselves of permanent campaign tactics.

#### **IV. Building Support for the President**

To understand the motivations of both groups more deeply, and how they related to the goal of the permanent campaign, I followed up on the above question by asking outright, “in doing your job, to what degree is your end goal to build public support for the president?”

Obama Appointee 1 described it as “fifty-fifty of advancing the president versus keeping the public informed about the agency’s operations.” Obama Appointee 2 said building support for the president was “definitely at the heart of the end goal. At the end of the day he is the big boss, so of course that’s part of my role. The steps would be to do my job and make sure I’m getting as much positive coverage as possible, dealing with the negative stories, trying to mitigate the potential for those to have a bad impact.” Obama Appointee 4 explained that “a lot of the work we did was to try to show how dumb the [Republican presidential candidate Mitt] Romney” economic proposals were.

Bush Appointee 2 explained, “absolutely, if you are part of an administration and especially a major cabinet agency, you’re always responsible for forwarding the president’s agenda, and so my role would be to not only explain the administration’s position, but also to get down to the level where reporters, whether they agreed with a position or not, understood where we were coming from.” For Bush Appointee 4, “I thought the best way to earn support for the president was to earn support for his policies, so I thought about the policies, I was a true believer on the policies, and if we could really just sell them on the policies, some of that would accrue to the president.” Bush Appointee 3 explained that “I think, yeah, everything we did, in a small part of everything was, ‘is this going to reflect poorly on the president’s administration or not?’” The exception was Bush Appointee 5, who indicated that he could not remember.

Obama Appointee 5 was the only appointee to respond that he did not “feel like any of

the goal was to build public support for the president, because I think that's up to Organizing for America and the political arms of the organization. I think the job was more to make sure the public knew what the president was working on and the secretary, why they made this decision based on how it would impact lives, and to help them understand, especially given how complex the issues were that we talk about. If this doesn't happen, the interest rate on your car could go up." Here, however, the difference appeared to be semantic, since, as Bush Appointee 4 explained, it is reasonable to assume that building support for the president's policies should ultimately result in increased support for the president.

By contrast, almost all of the civil servants indicated that building support for the president was not their goal. In the words of Civil Servant 4, "that's not a factor;" in the words of Civil Servant 5, "Lordy, thank God" that is not part of the job description. Civil Servant 7 explained, "you know, I've never even thought of it that way. What we do is so apolitical," while Civil Servant 3 explained that the work of his bureau is "essential to just the good functioning of government" and "we have to do [the bureau's work] whether there's a Democratic or Republican administration." Civil Servant 1 indicated, "whether under Obama or Bush, I never felt like my job was to build support for the president or even to build support for the government as much as, 'here's the organization I work for and here's the work we do. You may have heard rumors, but here's how we do it.' If people saw the inner workings, I believe what they'd see is a lot of reasonable people trying hard to do a good job."

Nevertheless, several civil servants evinced an awareness of political realities and two explained explicitly that they try to support administration priorities. Civil Servant 2 explained that he is responsible for "developing flexible talking points that are true and real but can be utilized with whatever political perspective we're dealing with." Likewise, Civil Servant 6

explained:

I understand how it works, where the bureaus feed into Treasury, which feeds into the White House ... We're certainly trying to keep up to date and stay aware of the administration's policies and ... support their priorities where we can. Treasury has this weekly report ... and it's a 'what have you done for us lately' report, and one of the things in there is presidential and administration priorities, and we don't often have anything to include on that, only because it's often the Affordable Care Act or something we don't have anything to do with, but we remain cognizant of the administration policies and try to support them when we can. We're happy to. It's good for the agency when we can produce something for the administration.

Likewise, Civil Servant 5 explained that he did defend Obama's policies: "I explained them, I knew that was the job I was being asked to do," though he indicated that his role was unique and most civil servants were not asked to defend administration policies. Nevertheless, he argued, "there are smart civil servants at every agency who know that's an expectation of them if they're dealing with the outside world and wouldn't be speaking publicly unless they were doing that, and if for any reason they went off message, it's been my experience they will no longer be allowed to speak publicly."

Thus, somewhat surprisingly, several of the purportedly apolitical civil servants explained that they were aware of and attempted to contribute to the administration's political goals – a further indication of their loyalty to the chief executive. It likewise seemed clear from these responses that appointees were motivated by the goals of the permanent campaign, despite



the fact that they did not largely engage in the tactics of a permanent campaign.

## **V. Study of Journalism**

I had hypothesized that those government officials who studied journalism would be less willing to withhold or distort information because of the values they acquired during the course of their journalism training. Five of the seventeen government officials studied journalism as a major or minor at the undergraduate or graduate level. However, I did not find the practices of these officials, as a group, to differ significantly from those of their appointee or careerist counterparts who did not study journalism, and therefore concluded that this hypothesis could not be supported.

## **Differences Between Obama and Bush Administration Tactics**

As discussed in chapter 4, reporters overwhelmingly indicated that Obama appointees were significantly less forthcoming with information than the Bush appointees. I therefore investigated whether there were differences in the practice of a permanent campaign between the two administrations by asking many of my interview subjects what they thought accounted for this difference.

Reporters offered a variety of explanations for why this might be the case. Reporter 1, a veteran Treasury reporter, had an interesting hypothesis that reporters actually have an easier relationship with Republican administrations than with Democratic administrations, because Republicans perceive a liberal media bias:

With a Republican administration, there's a sort of understood adversarial relationship; sometimes with the Democratic administrations, we [would] get the feeling that they want us to give their side and they don't want to argue with us, they just want to tell us. It's easier to clarify a position by arguing it; a reporter is just naturally adversarial. We sometimes felt Democratic administrations didn't understand the value in an adversarial position as did the Republican administrations, and therefore it took longer and was sometimes more contentious to sort out and get a full understanding of any issue.

Reporter 7 concurred that “in some ways, Republicans on a superficial level play the press game a bit better ... Which is odd, given the fake belief that the media has a liberal bias. Maybe it's compensation for that, or something.”

Reporter 4, who worked for a media outlet popularly perceived as liberal, agreed with the hypothesis that the adversity Republicans assumed they would face from a more liberal press actually resulted in better relationships with members of the media:

Republican administrations tend to view the media as more adversarial from the outset and to treat it – to have a more formal relationship with it ... Democrats tend to regard the media as friendly, or think it ought to be friendly, and to respond with disappointment and anger when it behaves otherwise. They like the idea and hate the reality of the media with more intensity than Republican administrations. Republican appointees tend to have a transactional relationship with the media ... They believe you are not on their side and

aren't therefore as angry when you are not on their side. The emotional content of the relationship is much lower with Republican administrations. There is less expectation, less disappointment, less emotional volatility in the relationship. They understand each other in a way more accurately. ... Republicans don't expect to have that relationship as a potential ally, so to the extent we're less adversarial than they expect, that works to our advantage, whereas with a Democratic administration we were inevitably a disappointment, because there's that expectation of shared sympathies, goals, and worldview, but the realization that the media has different goals tends to come as a perpetual shock.

Of course, another possibility not mentioned by the reporters is that, if it is indeed true that the media has a liberal bias, the reporters themselves were predisposed to like the Obama administration, and therefore were more surprised and angered when the Obama appointees withheld information than they would have been with a conservative administration which they might expect from the outset to be secretive. This might cause the reporters' criticisms of the Obama administration to be exaggerated.

Interestingly, Reporter 2, who worked for a media organization popularly perceived as conservative, was especially critical of the *Bush* appointees. He believed that higher-level Bush appointees (who did not work in public affairs) "were more frequently interested in spinning and shading the truth than the Obama officials" and their spokespeople would convey these points on behalf of their principals and also provide more opportunities for their principals to make their cases directly to reporters. Reporter 2 suggested that Republican operatives may have worked harder to influence the press because they were "trained with the idea of media bias early on"

and felt that they needed to try especially hard to overcome it. For Reporter 2, this was not a good thing. He speculated about whether the Bush administration was “so good at spinning, even on financial and economic issues, that they prevented bad coverage even when the economy was turning and looking bad,” which caused the media to fail to report earlier warning signs of the impending 2008 financial crisis. When asked about Bush Appointee 1’s characterization of the last two years of President Bush’s second term as a period when the administration faced major hostility from the press, Reporter 2 suggested that the administration might have brought it on themselves, and it might have reflected backlash from the administration’s earlier excessive spin.

Reporter 2 indicated that he had not perceived differences in the level of sophistication with which Democrats and Republicans approached the press in covering politics outside of the presidency and therefore suggested that the differences between the two administrations might just reflect an “administration-wide cultural approach to not risking information getting out, not volunteering information” in the Obama administration. Reporter 7 likewise described the Obama administration as having “a very tightly controlled messaging machine, where there are not as many people as .... in the Bush administration ... empowered to provide actual information.”

This argument was also recently made in an influential *Politico* article which alleged that “conservatives assume a cozy relationship between this White House and the reporters who cover it. Wrong. Many reporters find Obama himself strangely fearful of talking with them and often aloof and cocky when he does. They find his staff needlessly stingy with information and thin-skinned about any tough coverage. He gets more-favorable-than-not coverage because many staffers are fearful of talking to reporters, even anonymously, and some reporters inevitably worry access or the chance of a presidential interview will decrease if they get in the face of this

White House.” (Vandehei and Allen 2013).

As discussed in chapter 2, the Obama administration has also been accused by the press of being particularly secretive. In 2013, the administration set a record in citing national security concerns to withhold information from the public 8,496 times (Nicks 2014). The use of this tool, along with the administration’s pursuit of investigations of the identities of leakers, also led *New York Times* editor Jill Abramson to call the Obama administration “the most secretive White House that I have ever been involved in covering” and former *Washington Post* editor Leonard Downie Jr. to describe the administration as the “most secretive and restrictive” administration since Nixon. (Mirkinson 2014; Dodson 2014).

However, the evidence considered in chapter 2 – including the admissions of President Bush’s own press secretary – make it difficult to argue that the withholding of information is confined to the Obama White House. Indeed, Reporter 5 – a veteran of the Treasury press corps – concurred with Reporters 2 and 7, arguing that “the biggest problem now is that the Treasury PR strategy is not run by the Treasury, it’s run by the White House and that just adds another layer and slows down responses to issues oftentimes,” however he indicated that this was not unique to the Obama administration; “it’s [been happening in] administrations for a long time.”

What may, in fact, be new in the Obama administration is a strategy described by *Politico* in which “the president has shut down interviews with many of the White House reporters who know the most and ask the toughest questions. Instead, he spends way more time talking directly to voters via friendly shows and media personalities. Why bother with The New York Times beat reporter when Obama can go on ‘The View’?” Jim Vandehei and Mike Allen argued that new media and technology has given the Obama administration more options for bypassing the traditional media, while decreased media budgets have given the mainstream press decreased

bargaining power vis-à-vis the administration (ibid.) However, this does not appear to be a plausible explanation in the case of the Treasury Department. While the Treasury does utilize a robust blog to promulgate its views, the financial beat reporters and press still remain the Treasury's main vehicle for sharing its news; *The View* and late-night comedy shows might be useful in helping the president reach the American people, but they are simply unlikely to cover the minutiae of economic and financial policy.

Reporter 5 had an alternate hypothesis, however, suggesting that the different relationships the administrations enjoyed with the press resulted heavily from the levels of experience of their spokespeople, as opposed to differences in partisan approaches to the press. He indicated that there were particularly strong spokespeople who had served in both administrations who had previously served as journalists, and therefore understood what reporters needed in order to do their jobs. With the exception of during the financial crisis, in which he found Bush spokespeople to be at the top of their game because "they had to be" given the gravity of the situation, he did not see overall differences in the sophistication of the Obama and Bush appointees. He found the idea that the Bush administration's sophisticated spin could have precluded reporters from recognizing the impending 2008 financial crisis as laughable, arguing that "it was not an event that anybody was seeing ... none of us working today had covered the 1929 crash, so we hadn't experienced the tidal wave that was about to hit us."

One Bush appointee was adamant that, as Reporters 2 and 7 suspected, Republican political operatives work harder to influence the press because they perceive themselves to have a disadvantage. The appointee argued that being a Republican is "like being a woman. You have to work twice as hard being a Republican, because there's already a prevailing narrative ... so we try to overcompensate." This appointee believed that the impact of such Republican efforts

was ultimately limited, however, because “they’re still gonna prefer Dems at the end of the day.” However, the appointee indicated that Bush appointees were extremely social with the press, indicating that “we had a lot of fun with them. We had our own DMZ [de-militarized zone] ... where we could hang out. That was us helping them help us.”

Another Bush appointee agreed with the assertion that Republican press aides work harder to influence the press, arguing that “whether it’s actual or perceived bias, we always try to work harder because we thought that we had to explain [our] policy positions.” He also acknowledged that President Bush’s “popularity was not that high and didn’t provide enough political capital to get things done. When an administration’s unpopular, you have to end up working harder to get things done.”

Civil Servant 5, who served under both the Bush and Obama administrations, clarified that part of the differential might be explained by his belief that the Bush administration had sharper policy positions to communicate in the first place. He argued that “part of it [is] that this administration hasn’t been as clear on what they want to achieve under cornerstone legislation like [the] Dodd-Frank [Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act.] It has taken a long time to roll out regulations and move on housing finance reform, so [the administration] doesn’t know what [they] want to say.” He argued that this caused administration officials to attempt to avoid the press altogether, explaining that a *Wall Street Journal* editor who had been trying to reach the White House called him at one point and said “you’re the only person who will pick up the phone and talk to me.”

Of course, one possible problem with the argument that the Bush appointees were fighting an uphill battle in the press is the fact that their economic views were actually broadly popular. Gallup polls from 2001, when President Bush took office, through 2013, show that

Americans have always been much more likely to describe their views on economic issues as conservative than as moderate or liberal. In 2013, forty-one percent of Americans described their economic views as conservative – a record low for this time period which was still significantly above the thirty-seven percent of Americans who described their economic views as moderate and the nineteen percent of Americans who described their economic views as liberal (Dugan 2013). This likely made it easier for the Bush appointees to sell their views, though of course this advantage would have been diminished if the reporters who were their interlocutors themselves had more liberal views – a question which is outside the scope of this project.

Bush Appointee 4, however, disagreed with the contention that Republicans work harder to overcome a liberal media bias, describing the idea as “bullshit.” He argued that the differences in access and reporter satisfaction between the two administrations were likely attributable to “differences in talent at the top,” indicating that he understood that Stephanie Cutter, who initially oversaw Treasury public affairs before moving to the White House and later serving as Deputy Campaign Manager on Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign, initially alienated reporters (a complaint also made by Reporter 4) whereas the previous top Treasury public affairs officials under the Bush administration possessed serious economic credentials. This of course echoed Reporter 5’s explanation for the differential.

However, Civil Servant 5, who, as noted, worked with Treasury spokespeople in both administrations, perceived an overall experience gap between the Bush and Obama White Houses. He noted that he was a Democrat and was therefore dismayed to observe that Obama “got the Millennial crowd all jazzed up [during his election campaign] and then ... hired them!” By contrast, he reported that Bush White House appointees tended to have experience in previous administrations. Civil Servant 5 found this differential to be the case at the level of



Treasury spokespeople as well, reporting in an observation resonant of Hecllo that “the Obama people were cycling in very quickly, and I was surprised how people were assigned beats randomly, and didn’t come in with experience on the issue, and left so soon that even after they learned, they would be gone. I never felt that way dealing with Bush spokespeople.”

In sum, there are a variety of possible explanations for the complaints of reporters that the Bush Treasury was more open than the Obama Treasury. For starters, as discussed in chapter 4, these complaints need to be approached with some degree of skepticism. As Obama Appointee 5 explained, “reporters will always say you’re not doing a good enough job so you will do more for them. There’s a certain level of almost manipulation that has to happen in these transactional relationships and we need to protect and advocate for our principals. They’re never going to think it’s all done great. ... If they weren’t saying you’re doing a bad job, then reporters would be doing a bad job.”

A different appointee, for example, described an “ongoing battle” in which reporters wanted to be given advance warning of upcoming Treasury designations freezing the assets of individuals with links to terrorist activities. Of course, such information was classified prior to release; the appointee explained to me that he could have been subject to jail time if he had acquiesced to the requests of the press. Furthermore, if an individual were to receive advance warning of a designation, he or she could pull their assets before banks were notified of the designation – indicating the sheer unreasonableness of reporters in this instance, and the degree to which the media will advocate for greater access even when the government has highly legitimate reasons for withholding information.

However, the alleged differential between the two administrations was so widely described that it nevertheless is likely to have some degree of merit. It may be true that some

Republican press operatives perceive themselves to have a disadvantage that compels them to work harder to explain themselves. Nevertheless, to the degree that the greater access they provide actually simply represents greater attempts to spin the press and shade the truth, as Reporter 2, who worked for an outlet popularly perceived to be conservative, alleged, it is unclear that this difference redounds to the benefit of the American people.

Another possibility is that the Bush Treasury spokespeople were simply better than the Obama spokespeople. For example, it is true that the top Treasury public affairs officials during the Bush administration, Michele Davis and Tony Fratto, both had academic backgrounds in economics, unlike their counterparts in the Obama administration. Additionally, the Bush appointees interviewed for this project had slightly longer tenures and previous experience than their Obama administration counterparts, although this finding is also reflective of the fact that two of the Bush appointees later served in higher-level Treasury public affairs posts. On the other hand, the Bush administration had been in office for seven years before the 2008 financial crisis, allowing time for their Treasury spokespeople to learn the ropes of their jobs under more pacific circumstances, while the Obama spokespeople inherited a global economic crisis with no modern precedent and its aftereffects – circumstances which can only have made it more difficult for them to master their jobs.

The fragility of the U.S. and global economy during the period in which the Obama appointees is another possible explanation for any differential that may have existed in the level of access afforded to the press under both administrations. As Obama Appointee 5 explained, “in government, there’s no reason to be cavalier.” The Treasury is generally considered to be one of the more conservative press shops in Washington; amidst a still shaky economic recovery, and with knowledge that a single statement (even if accurate) could hurt that recovery by tanking

markets and damaging confidence (as they had all seen occur during Geithner's 2009 speech, discussed in chapter 3) it seems unsurprising that the Obama appointees would exercise caution in their work. (Though, as discussed, the Obama administration has used national security concerns to withhold a record amount of information – suggesting that the practice of withholding is not unique to the Treasury Department – the fragility of the economy could account for why the Obama appointees were overall less forthcoming in their interactions with reporters. The level of access afforded reporters by Obama appointees in other agencies falls outside the scope of this study.)

Of course, the answer to whether this served the interests of the American people is mixed. Releasing information with caution in order to avoid roiling markets is good for the people; withholding information for partisan purposes or failing to highlight threats to economic stability is bad. To be sure, there is a strong precedent in American history for presidents of the United States to restrict the rights of citizens in times of emergency. This has especially been the case during times of war; President Lincoln set the precedent for this by beginning the Civil War without Congressional authorization, expanding the Army and Navy, suspending the writ of habeas corpus, and declaring martial law in parts of the country. In his 1864 letter to Albert G. Hodges, Lincoln argued that “measures, otherwise unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the constitution, through the preservation of the nation.” It is arguably the case that the preservation of the nation in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis required the Treasury to take measures to stabilize our financial system.

There is also certainly precedent for the expansion of presidential power during economic crises. In response to World War I, for example, President Wilson expanded his control over the economy by fixing prices and regulating industries. However, this study suggests that the

Treasury may have expanded its power in response to the 2008 financial crisis in part by being less transparent with the press. While many scholars have charged the government with over-classifying information, particularly during times of emergency, the withholding of non-classified information for the protection of the country has not previously been identified or discussed in the literature (Herman 2004). My findings suggest that, during times of crisis, government agencies may respond in part by being less open with the press – a proposition that should be tested with additional case studies. Of course, there will always be the potential for abuse in such circumstances, raising important questions about government accountability during times of crisis. As David Pozen has written, “state secrecy can deny citizens the ability to exercise their rights and liberties, to be free from the unjust and coercive exercise of power, and to understand the world around them. It threatens the project of collective self-determination.” (2010, 286).

Ultimately, the question of whether there are broader partisan differences in press tactics would also require additional evidence outside of the scope of this project, including data from other Democratic and Republican administrations. Nevertheless, it is a question worthy of future research, to which the findings of this project could contribute.

### **Conclusions and Analysis**

This project investigated the question of whether appointees or civil servants better serve the interests of the American people in Treasury public affairs positions, by considering whether either group was conducting a permanent partisan campaign. The evidence is unmistakable that civil servants better serve the interests of the American people because, while they appreciate that it is sometimes legitimate to withhold information, they are significantly more inclined to

provide information to the press. By contrast, some appointees expressed a belief in their prerogative to withhold any information that did not make the president look good. Perhaps most shocking and disheartening about these findings was that reporters themselves generally appeared to accept that appointees were within their rights to do so.

While the “right to withhold” asserted by appointees was perhaps the most disturbing finding of this study, in keeping with my hypothesis, it nevertheless does not appear that government officials in the Treasury are largely conducting a permanent campaign. In chapter 3, however, I hypothesized that the large volume of responsibilities of appointees would be found to preclude them from engaging in the more sophisticated techniques of the permanent campaign – providing a rather extraordinary mechanism of democratic protection. While I discovered that the workloads of the appointees I studied did, in fact, inhibit their ability to engage in proactive tactics, they nevertheless did find a significant amount of time to pitch stories and to craft and implement strategies to attain their desired levels of coverage. The tactics they utilized in undertaking this work, however, did not include elements of the permanent campaign.

Furthermore, it did not appear from their responses that the reason that appointees did not appeal to the emotions of the American people in their messages or use public opinion polling was because they lacked the time to do so. They simply did not appear to believe that such tactics would be helpful or appropriate, because they advocated policies crafted by policy experts even when, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, they were unpopular. Appealing to emotions appeared to happen in the context of attempting to explain policies to the average person – and not in an effort to stimulate the unthinking, irrational support for the president described by Blumenthal. They declined to make emotional appeals even when it arguably could have been effective for them to do so, in order to respond to allegations, for

example, that the administration was bailing out banks but not ordinary citizens in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

I further hypothesized that those government officials who studied journalism would be unwilling to withhold or distort information because of the values imbued during the course of their education. Five of the seventeen government officials studied journalism as a major or minor at the undergraduate or graduate level. (In order to protect their identities, I will not break down whether they were appointees or civil servants). However, I did not find the views of these officials, as a group, to differ significantly from those of their appointee or careerist counterparts. Thus, this hypothesis was not supported, although the sample was certainly small.

Finally, I had hypothesized that the government officials would report that attempts to convey mistruths would be counterproductive. Indeed, the officials all reported that they eschewed lying, and often reported that it was likely that such untruths would be uncovered. While the appointees were willing to withhold information, they were unwilling to convey outright mistruths.

My results indicated that appointees, but not civil servants, were clearly motivated by the goals of the permanent campaign: to build support for the president. They considered doing so to be a legitimate end of their work. Both groups also had the opportunity to engage in permanent campaign tactics, since they spent a significant percentage of their time crafting and implementing strategies in order to achieve their desired media coverage. However, the appointees nevertheless did not largely engage in the tactics of the permanent campaign, with the exception of withholding information.

Neither appointees nor civil servants appeared to be devoting excessive resources to burning the images of top officials, or to be engaging in other unexpected or diabolical public

relations tactics. While the appointees, in particular, may have carried out their work in a sophisticated manner, the specific techniques they reported using have long been common among public relations professionals. Likewise, when they crafted narratives, the appointees generally (though not always) described building their cases based upon facts.

In a particularly surprising finding, two of the key tools alleged by Blumenthal and Hecl to be utilized by appointees for partisan advantage – public opinion polls and appeals to the emotions of the citizenry – were widely eschewed by appointees, but utilized by civil servants in an effort to communicate generally non-partisan information to the American people efficaciously. By contrast, the appointees had never utilized public opinion polls and did not appear to believe that they would be helpful to their work. Although the appointees were aware of public opinion through reading reports of polls in the media, various appointees explained that such activity was the provenance of the White House, that their programs were designed with the aims of good policy, and that, in any event, the issues they worked on were too complex to take the opinions of the American people as a whole into account. When appointees did attempt to play to the emotions of the American people, they reported that they did so in an effort to explain complex policies in terms an ordinary person could understand. While support for a president's policies may ultimately result in support for the president, the appointees' descriptions of the cases in which they appealed to emotions differed in kind from the descriptions by Blumenthal of political operatives attempting to bypass the reason of the American people in order to gain partisan advantage.

The key area in which it is possible that a permanent campaign is being conducted is in the withholding of information requested by reporters. Appointees frequently reported that they liberally withheld information requested by the media, for purposes which did not appear to fit

into categories of legitimate reasons, such as protecting the market or national security. Some appointees suggested that they withheld any information which did not reflect favorably on the president. Remarkably, reporters seemed to accept this state of affairs as merely frustrating – not as illegitimate. This suggested that appointees could potentially be withholding an enormous volume of information from the American people – a prospect which cries out for further research. Ultimately, however, the question of whether the Bush and Obama appointees withheld more information than previous Treasury spokespeople falls outside of the gamut of this study.

While the evidence regarding the withholding of information was stark, this study also uncovered more limited evidence that appointees may also be lying. While the subjects of my interviews reported that they had never personally done so, both Obama and Bush appointees indicated that other appointees within their administrations had conveyed untruths. Furthermore, a majority of reporters believed that Treasury public affairs officials were guilty of lying to them.

Finally, I considered whether there are partisan differences in the use of permanent campaign tactics, because the reporters had overwhelmingly indicated that the Obama appointees provided less information and more restricted access than the Bush appointees. Although I suspect that the differential may reflect the fact that the Obama appointees operated in the context of a significantly more fragile economic environment than the Bush appointees had for the majority of their tenure, it is possible that there were also differences in the skill sets of the Bush and Obama appointees. Another possibility, which is also ripe for future research, is that some Republican press operatives work harder to achieve positive media coverage and make greater attempts to explain their positions to reporters than Democratic press operatives. Both groups may perceive the media to have a liberal media bias, which may cause Republican operatives to exert greater efforts to overcome this handicap and cause Democratic operatives to



underestimate the degree to which they need to provide information and access to reporters, and even spar with members of the press. While such a question could only be studied in the context of several administrations, it was nevertheless clear from my own interviews that the Bush appointees placed greater emphasis on building relationships with and explaining themselves to the reporters with whom they worked than the Obama appointees. The reporters whom I interviewed also vehemently proclaimed this to be the case.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusions and Implications**

This study set out to answer two questions: Do political appointees or civil servants serve as more effective advocates for the president of the United States? And how do these officials serve the interests of the American people?

This chapter will first summarize my results. I will then assess the accuracy and validity of my results. Next, I will consider how representative the results likely are of government officials in other positions and agencies, and offer suggestions for future research. I will then discuss the contributions this research makes to the literature. Finally, I will assess the implications of the results for presidential staffing decisions.

### **Summary of Results: Efficacy**

The findings suggest that civil servants are more effective in advancing an administration's arguments in the press than their appointee counterparts. My results indicate that, as is to be expected, civil servants have an effectiveness advantage in their significantly greater knowledge of their policy portfolios. It is of course vital for a public affairs officer to understand the policy they are communicating in order to effectively advance and rebut arguments. Also especially critically, civil servants enjoy greater credibility with reporters, who indicate that they approach the claims of civil servants with less skepticism than those of appointees.

On the other hand, appointees appear to be more effective in reversing the course of potentially negative press coverage, because both they themselves and reporters indicate that they more aggressively attempt to counter claims with which they disagree, while reporters indicate that they are open to such arguments and that this behavior does not generally poison their relationships or future coverage. Additionally, appointees appear to be somewhat faster at

responding to reporters; have somewhat greater access to key principals; and have somewhat of an advantage in shaping media coverage simply by virtue of the fact that they make more strenuous efforts to do so. (Of course, appointees may have worked harder overall to overcome their lack of prior knowledge, but this could not account for their greater efforts to actively shape media coverage).

However, the effectiveness advantage these factors give them is diminished by the fact that the information they provide is often unhelpful; they often withhold information to which they have access; and reporters view their claims skeptically. The latter finding is a particularly devastating handicap. While reporters must recognize that all of their sources have biases and information in the interests they provide, reporters were adamant that they view appointees to be particularly biased, and therefore lacking in credibility. This suggests that civil servants enjoy a major efficacy advantage in their ability to convey information with credibility in the media.

To be sure, reporters also perceived civil servants to be generally unsophisticated; they indicated that civil servants made few efforts to pitch stories and were not skilled in making persuasive arguments. However, other evidence uncovered in this study suggests that reporters may have underestimated the level of sophistication of civil servants, perhaps confounding it with the careerists' lack of overt political goals. For example, civil servants described engaging in two tactics which require a particularly high degree of savvy – utilizing public opinion polls and appealing to the emotions of the American people – with greater frequency than appointees. Of course, appointees may have eschewed such tactics because they believed that they would be seen as inappropriate attempts to achieve partisan gain, and therefore this measure does not suggest that civil servants are more sophisticated than appointees. It rather suggests that they approach their work with a level of savvy which may be underestimated.

The evidence thus indicates that the sophistication of civil servants may be underappreciated, while careerists enjoy a level of knowledge and trust with the press that their appointee counterparts severely lack – suggesting that civil servants may be more effective than the president’s own appointees in advancing administration goals in the press.

### **Summary of Results: Loyalty**

The results indicate a roughly similar number of acts of disloyalty conducted by appointees and by civil servants.

Unlike the appointees, when civil servants disagreed with the administration they served, a small number (one of the seven civil servants interviewed) indicated a willingness to share points of policy disagreement with the press. Perhaps more remarkable, however, is the large number of civil servants who insisted that it was not their place to do so – even when they witnessed what they believed to be large-scale waste of taxpayer dollars, believed the administration was making unsupportable claims for partisan advantage, or saw warning signs of an impending global financial meltdown! Furthermore, as previously discussed, my sample likely over-represents individuals who are inclined to leak, since more cautious public affairs officials likely would have declined my request for interview.

However, it is clear that appointees leaked, as well. While the appointees who I interviewed claimed never to have leaked, I had reason to question the claims of one Bush appointee and one Obama appointee. Coincidentally, two sources independently volunteered to me, without provocation, in discussions in which I had not mentioned the individuals in question, that they suspected these two appointees of leaking, as well. In addition, the government officials were not themselves aware of a single instance in which a civil servant had leaked information to

the press. However, they were aware of numerous instances in which appointees had been identified as the sources of leaks.

These claims are seemingly contradicted by the accounts of reporters. Four reporters who received leaks indicated that civil servants “leak” more, while two indicated that appointees and civil servants leak with roughly the same frequency. However, upon closer examination, the majority of instances of purported leaks by civil servants appeared to be somewhat innocuous. First, such instances were very rare. Second, in such instances, civil servants were almost always, in the course of conversations that were already occurring, simply more willing to acknowledge the fact that reasonable individuals might have a point of view other than that of the administration (a state of affairs which cannot have been shocking to reporters). Of course, the greater ideological and political agreement among the president and appointees appears to have caused appointees to argue the administration’s position more narrowly and forcefully. However, the evidence of the “appointee discount” discussed in chapter 4 suggests that this behavior on the part of civil servants might have earned them credibility in the eyes of the press which ultimately allowed them to serve as stronger spokespeople – even though their superiors would have been unlikely to approve such a strategy and the president would be likely to view their acts as ones of insubordination.

This project ultimately identified no evidence of major insubordination by appointees nor by civil servants. I saw the actions of leaks by both groups unearthed in this project as certainly, at least at times, unhelpful to the president, but not posing significant threats to the administrations they served. Based upon the knowledge of government officials, appointees leak more, but based upon the feedback of reporters, civil servants leak more. Based upon the claims of government officials regarding their own behavior, civil servants leak more, however I had

reason to question the veracity of two claims by appointees that they never leaked. While the responses of reporters should be more reliable since they unquestionably know the true identities of leakers, and therefore it is possible that civil servants leak more, this cannot be concluded from the relatively small difference in the responses of reporters (one of whom reported that neither group leaked, four of whom reported that civil servants leaked more, and two of whom reported that they leaked with the same frequency. Indeed, reporter 4, who was among the group who believed that civil servants leaked more, was clear that he was not entirely sure; if he had concluded that appointees leaked with the same frequency, the results would have been evenly split. Though, to be sure, it is also revealing that none of the reporters believed that appointees leaked more.) I therefore concluded that both groups leaked with *roughly* the same degree of frequency, though it does remain possible that civil servants leak more.

Obviously this estimate is approximate based upon the results; it would be nearly impossible to precisely quantify the occurrence of such events given the interests leakers by nature will have in shielding their identities and the interests of reporters in protecting their sources. However, these findings do provide significantly more specific insight than the largely anecdotal descriptions of leaking otherwise available in the academic literature, and it appears from these findings that any differences that may exist in the frequency of leaking between the two groups are relatively marginal. As hypothesized, civil servants appear to be no less loyal to the presidents they serve than their appointee counterparts.

Of course, the causal factors examined suggested that, in areas other than leaking, appointees were particularly loyal to the president; additionally, the study of the permanent campaign found that appointees are much more protective of information that could be potentially damaging to the president. This may help explain why presidents hire appointees in

the first place. However, the evidence examined in the previous chapter suggests that this zealotness may actually be detrimental to appointees in public affairs positions, by weakening their credibility with the press.

### **Summary of Results: The Permanent Campaign**

In keeping with my hypothesis that the massive workloads of appointees leave them lacking the time to engage in a permanent campaign, the appointees were clear that the large volume of incoming requests they received from reporters prevented them from engaging in more proactive tactics. Nevertheless, appointees still spent the majority of their time engaging in proactive tactics. Interestingly, appointees still spent much more time pitching stories to reporters than civil servants and only two percent less of their time than civil servants crafting proactive strategies (a number of hours that may still have been greater than that of civil servants, since appointees work longer hours).

The appointees were also clearly motivated by the end goal of the permanent campaign, which is to build public support for the president. However, when both government officials and the reporters with whom they frequently interacted described the tactics that the officials employed, none were particularly sophisticated or diabolical, and none of the descriptions suggested that they were utilizing the tools of the permanent campaign. Unexpectedly, civil servants were much more likely than appointees to engage in two classic tactics of the permanent campaign as described by Blumenthal and Hecl: appealing to the emotions, as opposed to the reason, of the American people, and utilizing public opinion polls. However, neither group utilized these tools in order to build support for the president, thus disqualifying them as examples of the permanent campaign. The descriptions of both groups regarding how they craft

narratives likewise did not provide significant evidence of a permanent campaign.

However, this project did uncover potentially very disturbing evidence of the withholding of information. Some appointees did not appear to believe that the public had the right to any information which would not reflect favorably on the president. This evidence is troubling; perhaps most surprising about it is the fact that reporters do not find the state of affairs to be all that surprising or alarming.

Of course, McClellan was clear that deception (measured in this study by withholding and lying) has always been present in Washington; what was new, for him, was that the level of deception had reached unprecedented levels. It is outside the scope of this study to determine whether the Bush and Obama appointees withheld more information than their Treasury predecessors under previous administrations. This project therefore registers the views of the appointees as a potentially very significant threat to democracy, but cannot conclude that it is evidence of a permanent campaign.

This project also uncovered limited evidence of lying by appointees; this practice was denied by every government official but alleged by a majority of reporters. Appointees in both administrations believed that their counterparts were guilty of lying, though it is not clear that this necessarily occurred outside of the White Houses of both administrations. Given the evidence examined in chapter 2 of lying by previous administrations, it appears unlikely that the “shading” uncovered in this project exceeds that of previous administrations, although this cannot be determined definitively under the scope of this project. It is nevertheless clear that appointees withhold and distort information, and that they do so to a much greater degree than civil servants – suggesting that civil servants better serve the interests of the American people in Treasury public affairs roles.



Finally, this project considered the allegations of reporters that the Obama appointees withheld information to a greater degree than the Bush appointees. It appears likely that some of these charges by reporters are self-serving; some may point to differences in the skill sets of the two groups. The explanation I find most probable is that the Obama appointees approach their work with a particular caution because they inherited a deeply unstable economy which is still in a fragile state of recovery. Nevertheless, this project also unearthed evidence suggesting that Republican press operatives may make greater efforts to influence media coverage because they perceive a liberal media bias and that Democratic operatives may underestimate the degree to which they need to spar with the press – a fascinating proposition worthy of future research.

### **Accuracy and Validity of the Results**

I will next address the accuracy and validity of my results, by considering the reliability of the responses of my interview subjects and the representativeness of my sample of Treasury appointees, civil servants, and reporters. The following section will consider how accurately the officials who were studied might represent appointees and civil servants in other federal positions.

#### *Reliability of the Responses of Interview Subjects*

The results of my interviews left me confident in the general accuracy and validity of my results. As discussed in chapter 3, I felt a comfortable rapport with twenty-three of my twenty-four interview subjects. With the exception of Bush Appointee 5, my interview subjects all seemed to take my project seriously and to genuinely want to provide thoughtful and accurate responses. They appeared to think deeply about my questions, and provided nuanced, detailed,

and insightful answers.

In part, their openness was clearly fostered by the fact that I pledged to keep their identities confidential. I considered many of the responses of the government officials (from the admission by one civil servant that he leaked information to the press to the candid responses of appointees regarding the sometimes strong-arm tactics in which they engaged or lack of influence they felt they enjoyed) to not necessarily reflect glowingly on the individuals describing them. I considered this to evince the willingness of my interview subjects to, at least often, be honest about their performance.

As indicated in chapter 3, because I worked with so many of the Obama appointees (which consisted of working in a shared office and attending daily meetings in which my fellow spokespeople summarized their work), the Obama appointees likely realized that it would have been particularly hard for them to make false assertions, because I was already broadly familiar with their work. Of course, this safeguard was somewhat diminished for the Bush appointees. However, the Bush appointees can only have been aware that I had an understanding of the general workings of the Treasury department, and was also, of course, acquainted with numerous civil servants who served under both administrations who I could have contacted with questions if I doubted their claims (with the exception of Bush Appointee 5, however, I had no such doubts). Of course, these circumstances would certainly not have made it impossible for either group to make false claims – it would have only made it harder. Nevertheless, my personal circumstances likely improved the accuracy of my results, and gave me a significant advantage in conducting this research.

The Bush appointees may also have had greater reason to be cautious in our interviews, since they were all aware of my identity as a previous Democratic appointee and would not have

wanted to share information that could be used in a partisan attack. However, I felt that such concerns on the part of the Bush appointees were likely partly assuaged by the fact that I was introduced to most of the Bush appointees through President Bush's former speechwriter, who is a personal friend.

To be sure, as discussed in chapter 2, individuals can generally be expected to attempt to present themselves favorably in social situations (of course, the exception, in my experience, was the remarkably gauche behavior of Bush Appointee 5). I consider many of the Obama appointees who I interviewed to be personal friends, and all of the appointees and reporters whom I interviewed were likely keenly aware that we moved in the same social and professional circles. I conducted my interviews during the November-December holiday season, and one Bush appointee whom I interviewed greeted me by saying that my project was the talk of all of the holiday receptions he was attending. This therefore might have given the appointees whom I interviewed, in particular, reason not to share information which they felt would reflect abominably upon themselves, because they had reason to anticipate that they would encounter me in future professional and/or social situations.

I would also be remiss not to note that, in my interviews, so many of the appointees expressed a comfort with withholding information from reporters, raising the possibility that they also withheld information from me. An official who engaged in particularly egregious behavior would certainly have no incentive to share such information with me. While I attempted to corroborate the responses of the government officials by also querying the officials about the behavior of their colleagues, as well as by interviewing reporters, it nevertheless remains possible that the officials engaged in practices which I was unable to identify. However, I judge this possibility to have been unlikely to have significantly impacted my results. For example, if

an appointee had lied to me about public opinion polling, it is almost certain that other Treasury appointees would have been aware that polling had been conducted by their office. I consider it wildly unlikely that all of the appointees would have lied to me about such behavior, especially since they did not know the identities of my other research subjects, nor the questions I would ask in advance, making it practically impossible for them to have coordinated their responses. It is, of course, still possible that there might be a general unspoken understanding to the effect that certain conduct would never be acknowledged.

I consider the queries to which my interview subjects would have had most reason to give me dishonest answers in order to protect themselves to be the questions of whether they ever lied to a reporter or leaked information. Of course, if they had lied to a reporter and not been exposed and chose not to share the information with me in our interview, I would have no way of detecting it. However, I consider it likely that if an official had lied to a reporter, this fact would eventually have been exposed, if not in the course of this project than by one of the many other interested parties that would have an incentive to do so, such as reporters or members of the opposition party (a view shared by so many of my interview subjects). Furthermore, even if the officials lied to me about whether they had personally leaked, I should nevertheless have been able to accurately measure the overall degree to which appointees and civil servants leaked in the responses I obtained from reporters.

The questions of whether officials withheld information, how they handled damaging information, and whether they were motivated by partisan goals were also particularly sensitive. However, the appointees were transparent that they in fact regularly withheld information (including damaging information) and were in fact driven by partisan aims, leaving me reason to conclude that they were honest in their responses. All of the other questions I asked were by

comparison innocuous; the fact that my interview subjects appeared to be honest about these more sensitive questions left me with a high degree of confidence that they would have been truthful in their other responses.

While the reporters whom I interviewed discussed the behavior of other individuals, and therefore were not likely to have been concerned to protect their own reputations, it is possible that they would have been inclined to dampen their criticism of appointees in order to avoid offending me, since I previously served as an appointee. For example, in the course of our conversations, reporters sometimes used phrases such as “you guys” to refer to appointees, and one reporter told me he hoped I would not be offended by his comments. However, I did not believe significant sugarcoating actually occurred, because reporters were generally so critical of appointees, and of the Obama appointees in particular, in our interviews.

Of course, the exception to my confidence in the overall veracity of the responses of my interview subjects was Bush Appointee 5, whom I did not feel answered my questions in good faith. However, I accounted for this judgment when drawing my overall conclusions. In general, however, there is reason to feel confident in the accuracy of my results.

### *Representativeness of the Sample*

Because I interviewed a large percentage of the officials who work or worked in public affairs for the Treasury under the Bush and Obama administrations, as well as a large percentage of the reporters for the most elite media outlets who regularly interact with Treasury public affairs officials, I have a very high degree of confidence that my results are representative of Treasury public affairs staff.

For example, as previously indicated, there are currently seven appointees serving as Treasury spokespeople (though of course, as previously discussed, there is a significant degree of

turnover in such positions). I interviewed five such appointees from the Obama administration and five appointees from the Bush administration, all of whom were also asked to address the behavior of their public affairs colleagues. Likewise, the Treasury website lists ten bureaus. I interviewed civil servants who worked in seven different offices, all of whom were likewise asked to address the behavior of their public affairs colleagues.

Furthermore, there are only a handful of elite national newspapers and wire services in the United States. I interviewed seven reporters, representing seven different media organizations, who covered the Treasury for such outlets. This of course excluded broadcast reporters and bloggers, with whom Treasury public affairs officials also work, but should nevertheless provide a reliable sample of the impressions of the press. This was confirmed by the fact that the descriptions by reporters of the two most important findings regarding the relative efficacy of appointees – the “appointee discount” and the lack of access they felt they enjoyed under the Obama administration – were strikingly similar. (Of course, reporters differed in their responses on other measures, such as which group leaks more frequently, but I consider it credible that officials had different patterns of leaking to different media organizations. The fact that the media outlets popularly perceived as most liberal and most conservative reported the most frequent and dramatic occurrences of leaking is eminently logical).

As previously discussed, I approached all but one of the civil servants without prior acquaintance with or introductions to them, and many civil servants declined my request for interview. I therefore considered my sample of civil servants to represent those who were perhaps most open about their work. This likely skewed my results to over-represent the presence of leaking within the civil service. It may also have impacted my findings on the withholding of information, by over-representing the civil servants least likely to withhold.

Finally, Reporter 3 reported that he had more limited interactions with civil servants than the other reporters, likely making his impressions of civil servants as a group somewhat less precise. Additionally, Reporter 6 interacted less frequently with the Treasury officials than the other reporters, but I nevertheless considered his perspective to be important because of the publication for which he worked.

### **Representativeness of the Results and Suggestions for Future Research**

I have established that my results appear to well represent the practices of Treasury public affairs officials. How likely is it that the results are representative of appointees and civil servants who work in other government positions and other government agencies?

Of course, it is only possible to speculate on this matter. For example, future research should examine whether the “appointee discount” identified in this study applies to appointees in other positions, as well. It is logical to project that this problem might particularly bedevil appointees in externally-facing positions, where a key aim is to build outside support – such as cabinet heads and other senior officials, as well as appointees in offices of legislative affairs, public affairs, and public liaison. The beliefs of these appointees’ interlocutors regarding their partisan motivations might actually enhance the ability of such appointees to advance the president’s goals with like-minded politicians and organizations, while especially hampering their negotiations with entities which do not support the president. On the other hand, if other actors who share the partisan goals of the administration nevertheless view appointees as motivated by the goal of advancing the chief executive at the expense of all other values, this could hamper their ability to work with all other actors, regardless of political affinity. In this study, for example, reporters were universally found to apply the “appointee discount” under both the Obama and Bush administrations, regardless of the perceptions of their media outlets as

liberal or conservative. However, this may simply reflect the fact that reporters for mainstream newspapers and news wires do not approach their sources with liberal or conservative biases.

The findings of this study regarding the loyalty of civil servants generally confirmed the results of numerous other researchers that civil service insubordination is isolated and rare, but nevertheless real. This suggests that the results of this study regarding civil servants are likely applicable in other agencies and positions, as well. If anything, we should expect the results on the loyalty of civil servants to overstate the amount of careerist disloyalty in the government-at-large, because the time period studied included the Great Recession of 2008, and interview subjects were clear that this upheaval provoked a larger-than-normal amount of leaking by both civil servants and appointees (although, as discussed in chapter 1, other researchers have also measured the loyalty of civil servants in circumstances that would have been expected to provoke especially high levels of civil service insubordination). However, as discussed in chapter 3, the Treasury bureaus are, under more pacific circumstances, not typically the site of the kind of the partisan disagreement that has occurred in the EPA and social service agencies, where Democratic and Republican administrations tend to pursue dramatically different, and often controversial, goals.

Previous studies of the loyalty of civil servants have focused on whether civil servants faithfully implement the administration's policies. My research addresses this question by ascertaining whether civil servants and political appointees in public affairs positions faithfully communicate the administration's positions even when they disagree with them. However, it also utilizes an additional measure of loyalty (leaking) because previous anecdotal evidence suggested that this might be an area in which appointees are less loyal to the president than civil servants.



Unfortunately, few researchers have ever attempted to measure the loyalty of appointees, leaving us without a baseline with which to compare the results of this study. The information we have about leaking by appointees is largely anecdotal. Clearly, further research is called for in this area. However, unlike the results of this study on the relative efficacy of public affairs officers, the results on loyalty are certainly applicable to the entire Treasury (not just officials who work in public affairs), since my interview questions probed government officials on the practice of leaking anywhere within their organization, and queried reporters on the practice of leaking by any appointees or civil servants in federal economic agencies. This makes it more likely that the results would be reflective of other government agencies, as well. While appointees will likely always have incentives to leak damaging information in order to weaken rival staffers and/or grant favors to members of the press upon which they can later capitalize, the Great Recession likely gave the appointees studied in this project greater-than-normal incentives to leak in order to float trial balloons or advance their policy proposals internally within the administration. This project likely therefore overrepresented the typical amount of leaking we should expect by appointees (however, it also overrepresented the typical amount of leaking we should expect by civil servants for the same reason, which should therefore not have affected the ultimate conclusion that both groups do a roughly similar amount of leaking).

The findings of this study that a permanent campaign is not largely being conducted in the Treasury are likely, but not certainly, representative of other government agencies, as well. This is because, as discussed in chapter 3, if a permanent campaign were to be conducted in any government agency, the Treasury appears to be the most likely place to find it being waged, given the importance of the economy to the president's political fortunes and public approval ratings. This was especially the case during the time period studied, as the legacies of Presidents

Bush and Obama both depended heavily on their responses to the 2008 financial crisis. The Treasury was also responsible for advocating signature initiatives of both presidents. President Bush's tax reform, attempted Social Security reform, and landmark efforts to track the finances of terrorists after the attacks of September 11, 2001, all fell under the purview of the Treasury. Likewise, the Treasury is also responsible for President Obama's signature reform of the financial industry in an effort to prevent a future financial crisis, under the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. While Treasury therefore provides a particularly tough case of the presence of a permanent campaign, this finding should nevertheless be corroborated by studies of other agencies. Because President Obama's legacy is also perceived to be tied up in the success of his signature initiative, the Affordable Care Act, and because the Act has been the site of protracted and especially rancorous partisan disagreement and allegations of White House deception, the Department of Health and Human Services would also provide a particularly difficult test of the broader applicability of this finding.

There is reason, however, to both expect and hope that the practice of withholding information by appointees discovered in this project might be particularly severe at the Treasury. As explained in the previous chapter, the market-moving nature of much of the information possessed by the Treasury is truly anomalous among government agencies. Likewise, as explained in chapter 3, the economy is particularly critical to a president's public approval ratings and re-election prospects, which likely makes appointees particularly cautious about the release of economic information. The caution that can only have been engendered amidst the 2008 financial collapse and a still shaky and uneven recovery likely made Treasury public affairs officers particularly cautious regarding the release of information in the time period encompassed by this study. Nevertheless, the cavalier manner in which some appointees

responded that they only released information which was advantageous was striking and clearly calls for future research. This future research should probe more deeply into exactly how much information public affairs officers withhold, and under what circumstances. It should also study a wider body of government agencies.

Of course, because I studied public affairs officers, this study cannot account for the possibility that other officials in the Treasury are conducting a permanent campaign. For example, appointees in policy positions might be tailoring their programs to public opinion as reported in the media. They might also be timing their decisions around the electoral cycle, for example, by announcing popular policies and decisions in the lead-up to elections and saving unpopular decisions for after re-election campaigns.

Finally, my research unexpectedly uncovered another fascinating hypothesis, worthy of future research. Several of the Bush appointees and reporters whom I interviewed indicated that Republican political operatives work harder than Democrats to attempt to influence press coverage, because they perceive themselves to start out with a disadvantage because of a liberal media bias. Additionally, the results indicated that reporters were overall more satisfied with the level of access they enjoyed under the Bush administration than under the Obama administration. As previously discussed, this correlation does not necessarily prove causation; there are numerous other potential explanations, including differences in the skill sets of spokespeople and the vastly different economic circumstances during the majority of the time under which both administrations served. Nevertheless, this finding calls for future research into whether Republican operatives approach the press differently and whether, as some of my interview subjects suggested, this, ironically, helps them achieve better media relationships and better press coverage.

## **Key Contributions to the Literature**

My results make several important contributions to the literature. First, the findings on the “appointee discount” add a new factor to be considered in future studies of political appointees. As discussed in chapter 1, previous studies have contended that, to the degree that appointees are ineffective, the explanation lies in their less-detailed policy knowledge and shorter tenures. The findings of this study confirmed the relevance of these factors. However, I also identified a new phenomenon that may further diminish the efficacy of appointees: the “appointee discount.”

Reporters were clear that they viewed political appointees as less credible actors simply by virtue of their positions. They assumed that appointees were motivated by the near single-minded goal of advancing the president’s partisan interests, while civil servants were motivated by other goals, such as serving their country. As a result, they heavily discounted the claims of appointees. When an appointee made an assertion, reporters worked especially hard to consider possible alternative points of view. Two reporters indicated that the tenor of their skepticism towards appointees changed over time, suggesting that appointees have some influence over the degree of handicap this discount causes them. However, it was also clear that reporters approached all appointees, simply by virtue of their positions, with heightened suspicion. This can only have served to significantly inhibit the ability of appointees to act as effective advocates for the president.

Because the *raison d’etre* of public affairs officials is to communicate the administration’s messages, the “appointee discount” can only cripple the ability of appointees in such positions to do their jobs effectively. This points to a need for researchers examining the efficacy of government officials to pay closer attention to ideational factors, such as how the

motivations of appointees are perceived by others, and how this impacts their efficacy. For example, as discussed in chapter 1, the major piece of recent evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of appointees and civil servants was conducted by Lewis, and measured how the programs each group runs were internally evaluated (2008). One possibility for the lower scores of programs run by appointees, which was not considered by Lewis, is that the existence of such an “appointee discount” could have made it harder for appointees to build the support from external actors necessary to the success of many government programs. Additionally, Lewis’ work cannot account for the fact that appointees in positions that do not strictly involve policy management – such as cabinet heads and other senior officials, and appointees in offices of legislative affairs, public affairs, and public liaison – may be especially hampered in their efficacy by the ways in which their motivations are perceived by external actors whose cooperation is often essential to their work.

Second, this study casts doubt on the conventional wisdom that political appointees are more loyal advocates for the president than career civil servants. An enormous problem with past studies of the loyalty of civil servants is that scholars have generally not also simultaneously measured the loyalty of appointees, in order to consider acts of careerist insubordination in perspective. This study corroborated the findings of many previous scholars that a small number of civil servants will engage in acts of disloyalty. However, the significance of this result, and its implications for presidential staffing, can only be understood when the behavior of civil servants is studied in comparison with that of their appointee counterparts. Previous scholars have simply assumed that appointees will be loyal to the presidents they serve. This study finds that such assumptions are mistaken. In fact, in the case of Treasury officials, both groups of officials appear to engage in a roughly similar number of acts of leaking information which does not serve

the president's interests to the press.

As a result, this study calls into question the contention advanced by Lewis (2008), which has by now essentially attained the status of conventional wisdom, that presidents face a “loyalty-competence trade-off” in deciding whether to place civil servants or appointees in particular positions. No such trade-off can exist if civil servants are no less loyal to the president and more effective than their appointee counterparts – a possibility not afforded significant consideration by scholars who have not sufficiently tested the first part of this proposition.

This study also evinces the major limitations of past research which has attempted to ascertain whether civil servants are loyal by studying external indicators of agency actions. The results obtained in this study – including admissions by appointees and civil servants of behavior which arguably reflected rather poorly on themselves and their colleagues, such as leaking and withholding any information requested by the press which does not reflect well on the president – are by design shielded from public view and could only be learned through the establishment of trust and detailed conversations. Meanwhile, as argued by Cook in chapter 1, myriad factors influence the eventual output of government agencies beyond the simple loyalty of their careerists. To understand whether officials are loyal to the president requires isolating their specific actions in situations in which they disagree with the president – and thus cannot be accomplished without interacting with the subjects under study.

The methodology employed in this study of using outside actors – in this case, reporters – to corroborate and enhance the reports of government officials, is likewise unusual in the literature. However, the feedback of the government officials' interlocutors in the press was critical to identifying the “appointee discount” and the other opportunities the officials missed to advance the administration's positions in the press. This study could not have begun to

accurately measure the claims of the government officials about their behavior without understanding the impact of their actions on their end recipients (in this case, reporters).

This project also contributed to the literature by studying *specific positions* in order to determine whether appointees or civil servants best serve the interests of the president and the American people in them. As discussed in the Introduction, there is a remarkable lacuna of evidence-based research to guide presidents in their staffing decisions. If future research were to replicate this approach, political scientists could begin to develop a body of work that would provide guideposts to administrations on the types of positions in which appointees serve best and the types of roles in which civil servants serve best.

In particular, my work began to build a much-needed literature on appointees in Schedule C positions. As discussed in the Introduction, there is such a dearth of knowledge regarding the individuals who serve in such positions that they have been dubbed by two of the pre-eminent scholars of political appointees as the “invisible presidential appointments.” (Lewis and Waterman 2013). However, it is precisely these lower-level appointments which are most interchangeable with civil service positions. By studying appointees in other Schedule C positions in comparison with civil servants, scholars can begin to achieve a clearer picture of what staffing arrangements work best across the government.

Third, and equally significantly, this study began to measure, for the first time, whether a permanent campaign is being conducted in government agencies. The findings suggest that the Treasury’s public affairs officers are not, in fact, conducting a permanent campaign (although, as previously discussed, it remains possible that other Treasury officials are doing so by making policy decisions based upon what they know to be popular). Unexpectedly, the sophisticated tools of political campaigns that critics have charged appointees with improperly employing in

government were actually utilized not by appointees, but rather by civil servants, in the pursuit of decidedly non-partisan aims. The one tactic of the permanent campaign that was clearly employed to a significant degree by appointees – but not civil servants – was the withholding of the information from the press. Some appointees appeared to believe that they had the right to withhold any information that was potentially damaging to the president. While it is unclear whether such withholding has increased over time, now that it has been identified as the key permanent campaign tactic being employed by appointees, further research is in order, to understand how the practice of withholding is conducted more specifically, and across other government agencies. Finally, while this project uncovered some evidence that some appointees would tell untruths to make the president look good, such behavior appeared to have been much more limited, and it was not at all clear that it was conducted outside of the White House.

Finally, this study began to develop deeper knowledge of the practices of government agency public affairs officers, who had not been studied in detail since the pre-digital era. While the Treasury public affairs officers were not found to engage in particularly sophisticated or Machiavellian techniques, some were evinced to believe that they do not have an obligation to share information with the American people unless it serves their interests. This finding was shocking, and indeed begs for further research. The possibility identified in this project that Republican operatives work harder to achieve positive media coverage, while Democratic operatives underestimate the degree to which they need to engage in sometimes antagonistic exchanges with the press also presents a tantalizing proposition for future researchers. If true, such a finding could help to explain the widely discussed puzzle of why President Obama was a superior communicator as a candidate but, in office, his administration has failed to communicate effectively with the American people. It would also be a particularly interesting



finding to practitioners, because it would begin to identify a source of possibly significant partisan advantage.

### **Recommendations for the President**

My results suggest that efforts by modern presidents to improve their efficacy by hiring more political appointees have been counterproductive. The findings suggest that the president would be wise to reduce his reliance on appointees in the roles of Treasury spokespeople, given the fact that civil servants overall serve as more effective and no less loyal administration advocates in such positions. Of course, some of the policy portfolios for which Treasury spokespeople are responsible include policies which are the site of major partisan disagreement (such as tax and economic policy). In such positions, it would not be appropriate to utilize a civil servant. However, as discussed in chapter 5, many of the Treasury portfolios, including TARP, Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, and International Affairs, encompass policies which change little over the course of different administrations.

Utilizing civil servants in such roles would allow these spokespeople to develop the detailed expertise in their subject areas, which would help them to better explain policies to reporters. This would likely at least partially address the major complaint of reporters that they feel that they are in the dark on administration thinking and the technical operations of Treasury programs. The ability of civil servants to make more detailed and nuanced arguments on behalf of such policies would likewise engender greater support for them. Civil servants would also enjoy better credibility with reporters, paradoxically allowing them to better advance the president's arguments in the press. To be sure, civil servants in such positions would continue to report to Deputy Assistant Secretaries of Public Affairs – who would continue to provide political oversight and input into their work, even though the appearance of it would be reduced.

Of course, civil servants tend not to work the same particularly long hours as appointees, suggesting that using civil servants in such positions might slightly raise personnel costs. On the other hand, civil servants may be able to work more quickly than their appointee counterparts if they develop the detailed policy knowledge that allows them to respond more rapidly to reporters, as Bush Appointee 4 described in chapter 4. Additionally, such public affairs officers would likely not be too tired to think or argue back – providing an additional effectiveness boost.

The results also suggest that the administration should also look at public affairs posts in other government agencies, to likewise replace Schedule C appointees with civil servants in positions responsible for advocating policies that are not the nexus of major partisan disagreement.

Presidents would likely also win plaudits from good government groups for initiating such changes – including the legions of groups and scholars who have called for reducing appointees over the past several decades. Such changes would almost certainly be seen as a win for the American people, perhaps beginning to restore the record low levels of faith in our government which would likely further boost support for the president.

## **Conclusion**

This study found evidence suggesting that modern presidents have been misguided in their decisions to hire increased political appointees. Paradoxically, much-maligned civil servants were found to better promote the economic agendas of Presidents Bush and Obama in the press than their own political appointees. On the other hand, Treasury political appointees were not discovered to largely be engaged in the “permanent campaign,” which their White House counterparts have been charged with conducting. Appointees were, however, found to

withhold significantly more information from the press than their civil service counterparts, suggesting that the interests of the American people are also less well-served by appointee spokespeople. The evidence of the “appointee discount” and the roughly similar levels of loyalty exhibited by appointees and civil servants should cause presidential administrations to re-think the conventional wisdom that political appointees best advance the president’s agenda. The results of this study suggest that both the American people and presidents of the United States would be better served by such an outcome.

## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

### **A. Interview Questions for Political Appointees and Civil Servants**

*My first set of questions is designed to help me understand the differences between political appointees and civil servants who work in government public affairs positions.*

1. How long have you been in your current position?
2. I'm interested in your background, but please keep in mind that these questions are only designed to help me draw comparisons between my interview subjects, and I will not include any information that could be used to identify you in my publication. How many years of experience did you have before you started your current job? What did you do in the past?
3. Where did you go to school and what did you study?
4. What is your subject matter portfolio in your current job?
5. Is your overall workload reasonable?
6. How did you learn the subject matter of your portfolio, and was it easy or hard? At what point did you begin to feel comfortable with your subject matter portfolio?
7. How well would you say you know the policy substance of the portfolio you cover now: very well, pretty well, or it is easy to feel a little behind the curve here?
8. I know that you arrange media interviews for your principal(s). If you were to do the interviews yourself, how well do you think you'd do?

9. Many of the reporters who cover economic issues have been doing so for a long time. Do you think that gives them an advantage over you? How do you handle it?

10. Is it important for you to coordinate with other government spokespeople? How much time do you spend doing so?

11. How well do you get along with the reporters you work with? Do things ever become heated? If so, how often? How do you handle such situations?

12. When a reporter sends you a question, how long does it typically take you to respond?

13. How satisfied are you with the access you have to the principals for whom you work? How does your level of access affect your work?

14. Who do you think is more effective in conveying the administration's messages in the press: civil servants or political appointees? Why?

15. How much influence do you think you have in shaping the topics covered by the reporters who you try to influence?

16. How much influence do you think you have in shaping the tone and content of stories you try to influence?

*I would imagine that sometimes people who work in your position would be asked to advocate a position with which they didn't personally agree. My next set of questions is designed to help me understand whether that happened to you and if so how you coped with it. Please keep in mind that I will not publish any details you might share that could be used to identify you.*

1. What do you think someone in your position should do if asked to advocate a position with which he or she personally disagrees?
2. Does/did this ever happen to you? If so, how often and how did you react? Would you be comfortable giving me an example?
3. One of the things I'm interested in is leaks. I think of leaks as information given without attribution to reporters which does not further the interests of the administration – as opposed to plants, which further the interests of the administration. In your experience, do leaks happen often? Who does the leaking that does happen? Do you think appointees or civil servants leak more frequently? Why?
4. Have you even been tempted to leak information to the press? Can you tell me a little about the circumstances?
5. I'd like to talk a bit about the political views of the people who work in your public affairs office. Do you think they have an impact on the work they do? How about for you personally?
6. *[Asked to political appointees only:]* Would you consider doing this job under an administration of a different political party? Why or why not?

*My final set of questions is designed to help me understand the strategies you use in communicating with the American people about the economy.*

1. How would you describe the ultimate goals of your work? What are you trying to achieve each day?
2. In doing your job, to what degree is your end goal to build public support for the president? What steps do you take to achieve it?

3. I'm interested in the ways you try to influence media coverage. Can you tell me about the more sophisticated techniques you use to shape what reporters cover?
4. Do you ever try to appeal to the emotions, as opposed to the reason, of the American people in the messages you craft?
5. Do you ever use public opinion polls in your work? If yes, how do you use them and how often do you use them? If no, why not?
6. What percent of your time would you estimate you spend doing each of these three things: responding to questions from reporters, pitching them stories, and crafting and implementing strategies to attain desired coverage?
7. Do you believe it's ever appropriate for someone in your position to withhold information requested by the press or to shade the truth? What would the circumstances be? Does this happen often or rarely in your work?
8. Let's say someone else had your position and he or she wanted to tell untruths to make the president look good. Would it be possible for him or her to do so? Have you or your colleagues ever attempted to do so, and if so, were the attempts successful?
9. Every administration tries to avoid negative press coverage. How does your office determine how to handle information that is potentially damaging or embarrassing?
10. I'm interested in the mix of messages you work to convey in the press. What percentage of the messages you seek to promulgate would you describe as ideas (like ways of viewing particular things) and narratives?

11. How do you develop and sculpt narratives to make your points?

12. How much time do you spend focusing on the profiles and images of the officials for whom you work? Is it a good use of your time?

### **B. Interview Questions for Reporters**

*My first set of questions is designed to help me understand whether civil servants or political appointees are more effective advocates for the administrations they serve.*

1. How long have you been reporting on the Treasury?

2. I'm interested in the public affairs officials at economic agencies with whom you work. What would you say the strengths and weaknesses are of the political appointees? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the civil servants?

3. How convincing to you are the arguments the political appointees make to you? How convincing are the arguments of the civil servants? How do they compare?

4. To what degree do the political appointees influence the topics on which you ultimately report? To what degree do the civil servants influence the topics on which you ultimately report? How do they compare?

5. To what degree do the political appointees influence the tone and content of what you ultimately report? To what degree do the civil servants influence the tone and content of what you ultimately report? How do they compare?



6. How well do you think the political appointees know the subject matter they're responsible for? How well do the civil servants know the subject matter they're responsible for? How do they compare?

7. Do political appointees or civil servants respond to you more quickly? Which group is better at getting you the information you need?

8. Do you generally think you know more about the issues that federal economic agencies work on than the political appointees and/or the civil servants in public affairs? Is this an issue for you? How?

9. Do you find yourself more skeptical regarding the information put out by public affairs officers who are political appointees or civil servants? Why?

*My next set of questions is designed to help me understand whether political appointees or civil servants are more loyal advocates for the administrations they serve.*

1. One of the things I'm interested in in this research is leaks. I think of leaks as information given without attribution to reporters which does not further the interests of the administration – as opposed to plants, which further the interests of the administration. In your personal experience, how often do the political appointees in federal economic agencies leak information to you? How often do the civil servants leak? Is there a difference in the nature of the things they leak?

2. What do you think the motivations of the leakers typically are? Does this differ for civil servants and appointees?

3. Has any political appointee ever indicated to you that he or she personally disagreed with the position he or she was required to officially advocate? How many times has this happened? Over how many years? How about civil servants?

*My final set of questions is designed to help me understand the techniques that public affairs officers use in attempting to shape media coverage.*

1. What percentage of the information you receive from political appointees would you say has an interpretive element, as opposed to being more directly factual? What is the corresponding percentage for civil servants?

2. Do you get the sense that appointees often alter their messages in response to public opinion or to try to shape public opinion, and do you get the sense that civil servants do so?

3. Have you ever become aware of practices public affairs appointees engaged in which you felt were inappropriate? How about civil servants? If so, which group did so more often and can you give some examples?

4. What do you think are some of the savvier things federal economic agencies do to shape the coverage they receive in the press?

5. What do you think it would serve the interests of the Treasury for their public affairs officers to do differently?

6. What do appointees do when they're upset with your coverage, and what do civil servants do? How, if at all, do their responses affect your coverage?

## Appendix B: Bush Appointee 5

As indicated in Chapter 3, I enjoyed a warm and productive rapport with every research subject except Bush Appointee 5. While I felt that my other twenty-three interview subjects took my project seriously, attempted to consider and offer detailed, helpful answers to my questions, and treated me with respect, the disposition of this interview subject surprised me considerably.

Bush Appointee 5 insisted repeatedly that the questions I asked him were “bad,” and often refused either to answer them or to provide a reason for not answering them. He indicated that he could not understand many of my questions, including these:

·“Many of the reporters who cover economic issues have been doing so for a long time. Do you think that gives them an advantage over you?”

·“How do you develop and sculpt narratives to make your points?”

·“How much time did you spend focusing on the profiles and images of the officials for whom you worked? Was it a good use of your time?”

Often, he tried to pejoratively explain to me why my questions could not be answered in black or white terms; I replied that I would welcome a nuanced response explaining the circumstances under which his answer might vary; however, he would typically instead turn back to making his original point about why my question was dumb.

For many questions, such as how much influence he had over the topics covered by reporters or the tone and content of media coverage, he indicated that he could not remember, because his service in the Bush administration was so very long ago, but he did so rapidly without seeming to exert any effort to think. When I attempted to ask what percentage of the messages he sought to convey were ideas and narratives, he indicated that he could not

remember long before I had an opportunity to finish stating the question out loud.

It was also abundantly clear that Bush Appointee 5 simply did not trust me enough to answer my questions. For example, when I asked how he got along with reporters, he indicated that he did not want to answer and would not provide a reason for not answering. When I asked him whether his political views impacted his work, he replied “I don’t feel comfortable, I just decline to comment.”

At other times, I felt that his rapidly-fired responses were blatantly disingenuous. For example, when I asked him how his office determined how to handle information that was potentially damaging or embarrassing, he indicated that he had never been involved in such a situation, despite the fact that he worked for the Treasury during the height of an unprecedented financial crisis that threatened the entire global economy.

Furthermore, he snapped his responses in a tone that can only be described as downright hostile. I attempted to re-set by lowering the volume of my voice below the level of normal conversation with which I had previously spoken to Bush Appointee 5, and twice asked whether it would be helpful for me to stop and explain my project in greater detail and answer any questions he might have about it, in an effort to put him at greater ease regarding my intentions. However, he declined my offer.

I found it perplexing why, if he truly could not remember the details of his work at Treasury and he did not find me to be trustworthy, Bush Appointee 5 had agreed to grant me an interview in the first place. My best supposition is that he granted the interview under good intentions, but then had a terrible day. We had originally been scheduled to meet at 10:00 am, but he indicated that morning that he needed to re-schedule without providing an explanation. We ended up meeting at 5:30 pm that evening in a conference room in his office, and he was clear

that “I’m just trying to get out of here.” However, because he clearly conveyed that he thought so little of my questions, I did not think that it would have been productive for me to suggest that I return at a different time. Since I had already started the interview, I needed to account for his responses in my results, so I judged it best to make the most of the situation that I could, while realizing that his responses would be significantly less helpful than those of my other interview subjects.

In part, I imagine that his distrust of me stemmed from the fact that, unlike almost all of the other appointees, I had no previous connection to Bush Appointee 5. As previously explained, I had been connected with one Bush appointee through a mutual friend and former colleague, and this Bush appointee in turn connected me to other Bush appointees. However, I identified Bush Appointee 5 by researching the names of the Bush Treasury appointees online and reaching out to him.

Of course, this fact alone cannot account for his suspicion of me, since the other Bush appointee who I approached blindly was among the most polite and loquacious of my interview subjects. Additionally, I approached six of the seven civil servants whom I interviewed without introduction from a mutual friend or colleague, and the civil servants were unfailingly helpful and forthcoming.

However, I found the fact that the Bush appointee who connected me to most of the other Bush appointees did not suggest that I speak with Bush Appointee 5 to be potentially revealing. Perhaps he is considered by the others to reflect poorly on the administration. This supposition is further supported by the fact that one of the Bush appointees whom I interviewed indicated to me that she suspected Bush Appointee 5 (and no other Bush Treasury appointee) of leaking information to the press.

Ultimately, I concluded that Bush Appointee 5 can only be assumed to have been having a terrible day because I did not think it possible that he could have achieved his impressive professional and educational credentials if he treated everyone with whom he came into contact with the insolence he exhibited in our interview. At the same time, I did consider his behavior to be relevant to my study of the qualifications of the government officials because it indicated that, at least at times, he exhibited behavior in his interactions with other professionals which I consider to be highly inappropriate. While he must have interpreted my interview questions as potentially threatening, such situations would of course have been a regular occurrence in his interactions with reporters at the Treasury. I therefore found his inability to comport himself appropriately in the situation to be truly remarkable – and to reflect terribly on the administration for which he served.

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## **Autobiographical Statement**

Kara S. Alaimo is Assistant Professor of Public Relations in the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University.

From 2012-2013, she served as Head of Communications for the Secretariat of the United Nations Secretary-General's High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, a group of heads of state and other eminent thinkers convened to recommend the world's next agenda for eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development. In 2011, she was appointed by President Barack Obama as Spokesperson for International Affairs in the U.S. Treasury Department, where she communicated global economic diplomacy initiatives, including America's bilateral economic relationships; engagement in multilateral institutions including the G-20, World Bank, and IMF; and international monetary, trade, development, environmental, and energy policy. In this capacity, she also served as media adviser to Jim Yong Kim during his successful 2012 campaign for the World Bank Presidency.

Alaimo also previously served as the first Press Secretary of the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, Global Media Coordinator for the United Nations Millennium Campaign, and as a spokesperson for New York City economic development initiatives during the administration of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg.

She earned her Doctor of Philosophy, Master of Philosophy, and Master of Arts degrees at the City University of New York and her Bachelor of Arts at New York University.