

## WHITE HOUSE

Kelly moves to control the information Trump sees

A new process, laid out in two memos circulating in the West Wing this week, is supposed to ensure Kelly vets everything that hits the Resolute desk.

By ELIANA JOHNSON and NANCY COOK 08/24/2017 05:11 AM EDT

John Kelly is pictured. | AP

The new system laid out by chief of staff John Kelly is designed to ensure that the president won't see any reports or documents that haven't been vetted. | Alex Brandon/AP

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Confronted with a West Wing that treated policymaking as a free-for-all, President Donald Trump's chief of staff, John Kelly, is instituting a system used by previous administrations to limit internal competition — and to make himself the last word on the material that crosses the president's desk.

It's a quiet effort to make Trump conform to White House decision-making norms he's flouted without making him feel shackled or out of the loop. In a conference call last week, Kelly initiated a new policymaking process in which just he and one other aide — White House staff secretary Rob Porter, a little-known but highly regarded Rhodes

scholar who overlapped with Jared Kushner as an undergraduate at Harvard — will review all documents that cross the Resolute desk.

The new system, laid out in two memos co-authored by Kelly and Porter and distributed to Cabinet members and White House staffers in recent days, is designed to ensure that the president won't see any external policy documents, internal policy memos, agency reports and even news articles that haven't been vetted. Kelly's deputy, Kristjen Nielson, is also expected to assume an integral role.

The keystone of the new system is a "decision memo" that will — for each Trump policy — integrate the input of Cabinet agencies and policy councils and present the president with various options, as well as with the advantages and drawbacks of each one.

The Kelly-Porter reforms are in many ways a reversion to the habits of previous administrations, particularly in their attempt to ensure competing views are completely and straightforwardly presented to the president.

"There is a White House policy process, tried and true, that is not endemic to Republicans or Democrats, and it includes having the various policy councils bringing in the information and perspectives from agencies and elsewhere and then having the staff secretary's office share the policy council's memo around the office to get it vetted," said Tevi Troy, who served as deputy assistant to the president for domestic policy under George W. Bush.

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Porter, a Harvard Law graduate, has assumed a pivotal behind-the-scenes role in the administration, working even before Kelly's arrival to create form from chaos and to serve as an honest broker between the competing factions that populate the Trump White House. He's no stranger to the GOP's vast ideological spectrum, having served as chief of staff to Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and before that as counsel to Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio), an Ivy League blueblood and George H.W. Bush partisan, as well as to tea partier Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah).

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Former President Barack Obama's staff secretary prepared briefing books for the president that he took home each evening, making sure to incorporate competing viewpoints. "We really worked hard to limit the extent to which he would see anything

outside of that channel,” said Doug Kramer, Obama's staff secretary. “People are constantly trying to circumvent the process because they want to get to the president, particularly during emergencies.”

Some Oval Office veterans say the staff secretary has in recent years taken on an outsize role typically reserved for the White House chief of staff, from mediating policy disputes between senior advisers to resolving turf wars between the White House policy councils. In policy meetings on trade, for example, Porter has been left to mediate disputes between National Economic Council director Gary Cohn, who favors free trade, and protectionist Peter Navarro, the head of the White House’s National Trade Council.

White House aides note that the new system is likely to slow the policymaking process. Executive orders, dashed out in a matter of days at the outset of the administration, are now likely to go through weeks of review as they are circulated to policy advisers, lawyers and the president’s legislative affairs team.

But some hope that this new policymaking process will deliver legislative victories that have so far been elusive — particularly now that senior strategist Steve Bannon, who was known for skipping formal meetings to take his proposals directly to Trump, is out of the White House. One official called Bannon a “disruptive force” who did not want to follow any set path for making White House decisions.

“Gen. Kelly is instilling processes to ensure that the president has the information and analysis he needs to make decisions,” said White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. “The White House staff will continue to support the president by ensuring that the policy options presented to him reflect all relevant viewpoints, including any dissenting views.”

While former White House chief of staff Reince Priebus worked to systematize the policymaking process, White House aides say Priebus spent much of his time doing damage control and never instituted a holistic approach or managed to corral the flow of people and paper through the Oval Office, which until recently served as the social hub of the White House.

Donald Trump is pictured. | AP  
CONGRESS

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By JOSH DAWSEY and ELANA SCHOR

The president made policy pronouncements without consulting with all the stakeholders in his own administration; absent a formal policy process, their input often didn’t make it to the president’s desk. “In the past, a few senior administration officials unilaterally made policy calls that everyone had to live with,” said one senior administration official. “It seems like those days are over.”

The drawn-out saga to repeal and replace Obamacare revealed the weaknesses of the old system. In the early days of the administration and even the Trump transition, a number of domestic policy aides developed proposals for the potential repeal and replacement of Obamacare that included giving grants to states and the use of health savings accounts. Those ideas got tossed out once Tom Price was confirmed as secretary of Health and Human Services and indicated during a meeting in the Roosevelt Room that the White House would instead back the House plan, supported by Speaker Paul Ryan and Priebus.

Priebus was insistent on this option, according to two White House officials, and called a meeting at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in February where the House's plan was presented as the lone option to senior advisers.

Since taking over for Priebus last month, Kelly has sought to crack down not just on sneakiness and backbiting but also to impose order more broadly. He has tasked deputy chiefs of staff Rick Dearborn and Joe Hagin with bringing some order to the president's schedule, pushing them to plan events further in advance and to include one public-facing event each day and one travel event each week, according to a senior White House aide.

He is also reworking what were once free-flowing White House meetings. Each one now includes a list of attendees to prevent aides from inserting themselves gratuitously where Kelly does not want them. Said a top White House aide: "If you're not on the list, you can't get into the meeting."

Whether a president known for freelancing can live with military discipline is another matter. "If there was not this structure beforehand and if the structure has now been created and if they adhere to it, you will get better results, but there are some 'ifs' in my statement," Troy said. "The process works if people stick to it."