

# Kristen Silverberg

## A PATH TO THE WHITE HOUSE

*Why working for the government provides a rare opportunity to help influence the world in which we live.*

**I**N LAW SCHOOL, I IMAGINED THAT I would spend the bulk of my career in private practice. I envisioned participating in heady oral arguments or, on occasion, vindicating my client's position at trial. Although my time in private practice was invaluable, and although I have many friends from law school who are still flourishing at firms, I think that more young lawyers would do well to consider government employment. I cannot speak to the countless opportunities available to lawyers in state and local government, but my experience as a member of the Bush administration policy staff has been priceless. Without attempting to provide an exhaustive guide to seeking government employment, I will briefly describe a few "hows" and "whys" of jobs with the federal government, based on my limited personal experience.

### Why Government?

Even on the worst days, working in government can provide an invaluable perspective on this unique time in our nation's history. I will never forget returning to the West Wing on the night of September 11, after the terrible confusion of that day, to see the members of senior staff quietly preparing for the extraordinary task ahead. And there was no more compelling moment to me than watching the president leave for New York after the National Prayer Service. Some members of the White House staff describe poignant memories of the meeting with the families of Flight 93



Kristen Silverberg, right, accompanies President Bush and health care expert Anne Phelps to the White House. Silverberg, '96, serves as a special assistant to the president.

or of the president's September 20 speech to the nation. No one hopes to work for an administration during a time of national crisis, but having lived

through it, I'm not sure that anything but government service could have affected and inspired me in quite the same way.

## NEXT STEPS

**Best book about White House operations:** *The White House Staff: Inside the West Wing and Beyond*, by Bradley H. Patterson, Jr. (Brookings Institution Press, 2000)

**Best book about a presidential campaign:** *What It Takes*, by Richard Ben Kramer (Random House, 1992; Crown Publishing Group, 1998)

**Best Web site on the White House:** [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

**Best book about the White House by a former White House staffer:** *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* by H.R. Haldeman (Putnam, 1994)

**Best book by a current White House staffer:** *The Apprentice*, by Lewis Libby (Graywolf Press, 1996)

Most of my colleagues, not surprisingly, sought jobs with the administration because they hoped to play a role in positively shaping public policy. My job in the chief of staff's office, for example, allows me to participate in discussions of administration policy on a host of issues, including financial regulation, health care, budget, and welfare. Our office helps to ensure that decisions are well developed before they reach the president for final decision, so a colleague and I act as roving "trouble shooters" on behalf of the deputy chief of staff, participating in discussions of pressing issues and helping to crystallize them for decision by the president. For everyone involved in policy development, the job is endlessly challenging and rewarding because the decisions facing the policymakers inevitably involve difficult value judgments, the resolution of which will have far-reaching effects on the lives of real people.

Many White House staffers helping to shape administration policy on these issues are playing critical roles early in their careers. For example, Mark McClellan, 38, (grandson of former UT Law dean **W. Page Keeton**), serves on the Council of Economic Advisors and manages Medicare policy for the administration. Among other things, he leads an interagency group responsible for developing proposals to provide prescription drugs to senior citizens and negotiates health legislation on the Hill. UT Law grad **Rebecca Beynon**, 33, handled a broad range of regulatory issues as a lawyer in the Office of Management and Budget and now develops administrative policies to implement the president's Faith-based and Community Initiative. For someone committed to public policy, there are few opportunities to participate so actively in helping to guide our national choices.

There are, of course, less lofty reasons to pursue a government job. For one, in many cases, government jobs allow far more civilized and predictable work schedules than equivalent positions in the private sector. Many of my friends with senior-level

jobs at federal agencies can routinely leave work by 7:00 p.m., long before any of the law firm associates in town get paroled. Jobs on Capitol Hill, which can be hectic when Congress is in session, come with lengthy vacations over the August recess.

One word of caution—those who value comfortable work schedules should not consider White House employment. This White House, despite its family-friendly reputation, starts early in the morning and stays active quite late at night. It is still dark when the White House staff, led by the National Security team, begin arriving on the "18 acres" (Secret Service jargon for the White House complex.) Chief of Staff Andrew Card is at his desk by 6:15 a.m. (I arrive, caffeine in hand, much later.) When my day ends, typically at 9:30 or 10:00 p.m., my boss, Deputy Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten, is often still hard at work.

In addition, working in proximity to people who are making history can be exciting and valuable training. The most interesting days at the White House for any young staffer are the days when we meet with the president. On the television show *The West Wing*, President Bartlet engages in long, casual conversations with his staff about, for example,

the best way to baste a turkey. In one episode, President Bartlet filled out an aide's tax forms. But in the real White House, there is no more valuable commodity than the president's time, and staff are expected to use it wisely. Chief of Staff Andrew Card will screen requests to see the president by asking, "Do you want to see the president or do you need to see the president?" As a junior staffer, I rarely need to see the president (or, more precisely, he rarely needs to see me), so I have yet to overcome my tendency to become tongue-tied and awkward during meetings. I have, however, watched many of my colleagues with more administration experience comfortably provide the president with strong views on an issue. And I know that sometime later in life, I will confidently face down a corporate executive or court of appeals judge, knowing that I cut my teeth in a much more intimidating environment.

### How to Get an Interesting Job in the Government

One common path to a job in the White House is participation in a presidential campaign. In this White House, most of the senior staffers were active supporters of the president and vice president during the 2000 campaign; many were loyal supporters long before 2000.

Failing good foresight, stay flexible. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer worked on Elizabeth Dole's campaign before she withdrew. His work for the opposition so impressed Karen Hughes that he was quickly picked up by the Bush campaign and is now one of the president's trusted advisors.

I was hired to work in the White House after I had moved back to Austin to volunteer for the policy staff of the Bush campaign. My experience in Austin impressed upon me the importance, for campaign staff, of demonstrating a willingness to put in long hours on occasionally unglamorous jobs. Immediately after the election, a campaign colleague and I volunteered to get on a plane from Austin to Florida, as did many of our

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contemporaries in the White House. That painful month spent watching the ballot count helped us to earn the trust of the campaign staff and develop long-lasting relationships with our future colleagues in the administration.

Other experiences, in addition to working with a campaign, may lend themselves to future employment with the federal government. My time at Williams & Connolly undoubtedly made me a more qualified candidate for a position with the policy staff, which requires that I navigate a broad range of legal issues, as did my job at the firm. And dozens of the younger lawyers in the White House and the Justice Department are alumni of judicial clerkships, which frequently serve as farm teams for like-minded administrations.

## Forget the Money

During my clerkship, my co-clerks and I would pass long hours discussing how we would spend grotesquely high signing bonuses from D.C. law firms. So it was with some compunction that I accepted an annual salary at the White House that was less than my anticipated law firm bonus. I haven't regretted the decision for a minute, and I urge anyone presented with an exciting opportunity in government to think twice before turning down that experience for a more comfortable salary.

Many government jobs are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. Getting hired depends, in large part, on being in the right place at the right time. Many Republican lawyers spent the Clinton years desperately looking forward to the time when they could take drastic pay cuts to enter public service.

As one law school classmate told me, short-term financial comfort is important, but it is equally important to "build equity" in yourself. There is no substitute, in my experience, for a job you love. ✍️

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