President Ronald Reagan
Oral History Project

Briefing Materials

E. Pendleton James

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1976  James is President and owner of Pen James & Associates, Inc., a Los Angeles-based executive search firm. (*Public Papers of the President*, 04/05/1983)


1980  


*Spring*  James quietly begins to conduct the personnel operation from his Los Angeles office. (Meese, p. 57-58)

*September*  James moves to an office in Alexandria, Virginia to set up the Reagan-Bush Planning Task Force. He hires a small staff and, under the radar of the campaign staff and news media, begins working on appointment candidates. James meets frequently with Meese during this time. (Meese, p. 57-58; Shirley Anne Warshaw, *The Domestic Presidency: Policy Making in the White House*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997, p. 119)

*November*  At a news conference in Los Angeles on the 6th, Reagan names James to be the transition team’s Director of Personnel Management. His job is to head the recruiting drive for over 1,000 executive branch positions in the new Administration. (*The New York Times*, 11/07/1980)

*December*  James receives a list of 500 names from a committee of private executive recruiters he has enlisted to help fill top sub-Cabinet posts. The list contains both Democrats and Republicans. (*New York Times Abstracts*, 12/15/1980)

On the 22nd, Reagan announces the nomination of James G. Watt as Secretary-designate of the Interior. (*President Reagan*, p. 54)

William Wilson, a longtime friend of Reagan's, summons James and Meese to a meeting shortly after Christmas to discuss the role of Reagan’s “Kitchen Cabinet” in the appointment process. He tells James and Meese of his displeasure at the group’s lack of influence and his plans to move to Washington to help with the staffing at the subcabinet level, a move which reportedly frustrates James. It will not be until late February that the Kitchen Cabinet’s involvement begins to wane. (John P. Burke, *Presidential Transitions: From Politics to Practice*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000, p. 104)

1981

January

After receiving praise for the selection of many “nonpolitical” members for the Reagan Cabinet, James is confronted by a group of former campaign officials who are worried they will be left out of the new Administration. During the private meeting, James assures them that Reagan will remember them in future appointments. James also tells each official to make a list of three positions, within reason, that they would like to hold in the Reagan Administration. While assuaging many of the aides’ concerns, James also defends the job of his staff and the sophisticated, professional manner in which his office makes appointment recommendations. (*The New York Times*, 01/11/1981)

It is reported on the 13th that James will become Assistant to the President for Presidential Personnel. (*The Washington Post*, 01/13/2003)

On the 14th, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee votes 16-0, with three Democrats abstaining, to recommend the nomination of James Watt as Interior Secretary. Watt’s nomination had received tremendous opposition from environmental groups who pointed to his tenure at the Mountain States Legal Organization, a conservative law foundation that frequently challenged the Interior Department, as indicative of his agenda as Interior Secretary. Watt tries to placate his critics by promising to take a more moderate position on environmental issues than his foundation had. (*Reagan’s First Year*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1982, pp. 81-82; *President Reagan*, p. 55)

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approves the nomination of Alexander Haig for Secretary of State on the 15th by a vote of 15-2. The confirmation was delayed several weeks after opponents argued that his connection to Watergate
should be thoroughly investigated before a vote was cast. The inquiry was eventually dropped, and Haig’s grasp of foreign policy issues convinces the Committee to approve the nomination. *(Reagan’s First Year, pp. 81-81; President Reagan, p. 41)*

Defense Secretary-designate Caspar Weinberger is confirmed by the Senate on the 20th by a vote of 97-2. *(Reagan’s First Year, p. 82)*

On the 21st, the Senate confirms Donald Regan as Treasury Secretary, 98-0; Richard Schweiker as Secretary of Health and Human Services, 99-0; William Brock, III as U.S. Trade Representative, 99-0; and Alexander Haig as Secretary of State, 93-6. *(Reagan’s First Year, p. 82)*

On the 22nd, the Senate confirms Malcolm Baldrige as Secretary of Commerce, 97-1; Terrel Bell as Secretary of Education, 90-2; John Block as Secretary of Agriculture, 98-0; James Edwards as Secretary of Energy, 93-3; Drew Lewis as Secretary of Transportation, 98-0; Samuel Pierce as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, 98-0; William French Smith as Attorney General, 96-1; and James Watt as Secretary of the Interior, 83-12. *(Reagan’s First Year, pp. 81-82)*

The Senate confirms David Stockman as Director of the Office of Management and Budget, 93-0, and William Casey as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, 95-0, on the 27th. *(Reagan’s First Year, p. 82)*

Jeane Kirkpatrick is confirmed by the Senate on the 29th as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, 81-0. *(Reagan’s First Year, p. 82)*

On the 29th, the Senate Labor Committee votes, 11-0, to approve the nomination of Raymond Donovan as Labor Secretary. Five Democrats on the Committee vote “present.” Donovan’s nomination was delayed for weeks over charges that his firm had bribed corrupt union leaders to maintain “labor peace.” Donovan is recommended by the Committee after an FBI investigation fails to substantiate any of the charges. *(Reagan’s First Year, p. 82; President Reagan, p. 58)*

*February*

On the 3rd, Raymond J. Donovan is confirmed as Labor Secretary, 80-17. *(Reagan’s First Year, pp. 81-82)*

Chief of Staff James Baker urges personnel officials to work towards hiring more people from the Reagan campaign. Baker also asked that blacks, women, Latinos and other minority groups receive more posts in the Reagan government. The latter request is in response to complaints that these groups are underrepresented thus far in the Administration. *(The New York Times, 02/07/1981)*

In the February issue of *Conservative Digest*, magazine editor John Lofton calls for the firing of James. The article complains that the personnel office is passing over Reagan loyalists and appointing “retreads from the Nixon and Ford
Administrations.” Lofton says, “There will be no Reaganism without Reaganites.” James reacts with surprise to the charges, saying, “For years I thought I was a conservative, and now I find I’m not even considered a Republican.” (The Washington Post, 03/01/1981; The New York Times, 03/07/1981)

On the 17th, the White House prepares a list of important conservative appointments below the Cabinet level to placate those arguing that Reagan loyalists are underrepresented in the Administration. Among those included on this list are Lyn Nofziger, Richard V. Allen, Fred Ikle, Norman Ture, and Rich Williams. (The New York Times, 03/07/1981)

On the 24th, the Senate confirms William P. Clark as Deputy Secretary of State, 70-24. Clark’s admitted lack of foreign policy expertise made the nomination problematic. (Reagan’s First Year, p. 83)

May

It is reported that after 100 days in office, the Reagan Administration has yet to fill fifteen percent of executive branch posts, leading many to criticize the personnel office. James admits that a combination of the lengthy FBI and IRS background checks, the slow Senate confirmation process, and the detailed ethics and conflict of interests laws passed during “the Watergate hysteria” have made the process longer. But James defends the speed of appointments and cautions against moving too fast in a job staffing the executive branch. (The New York Times, 05/03/1981)

After months of opposition by environmental organizations, Anne McGill Gorsuch is unanimously confirmed on the 5th as Director of the Environmental Protection Agency after months of opposition by environmental organizations. (Reagan’s First Year, p. 83)

On the 20th, John B. Crowell, Jr. is confirmed by the Senate, 72-25, as Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and Environment. Crowell’s nomination had been delayed by investigations of conflict-of-interest charges. (Reagan’s First Year, p. 83)

June

On the 5th, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee votes, 13-4, to recommend that the Senate reject Ernest W. Lefever’s nomination as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. This was the first time in many years that the committee had rejected a presidential nominee. Lefever’s opposition to Carter’s human rights policies caused opponents to question his commitment to the role of human rights in foreign policy. He requests that his nomination be withdrawn hours after this vote. (Reagan’s First Year, p. 43)

Chester A. Crocker is confirmed, 84-7, on the 9th as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Crocker’s nomination had been held up for months by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), who had placed a hold on his vote after questioning
his commitment to Reagan’s conservative philosophy. (*Reagan’s First Year*, p. 83)

On the 11th, the Senate confirms Myer Rashish, 91-4, as Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs. Like Crocker, Rashish’s nomination was delayed by Senator Helms, who feared Rashish was not committed to Reagan’s policies. (*Reagan’s First Year*, p. 83)

At a three-day Republican National Committee meeting, anger is directed towards James and the personnel office for not appointing enough Reagan loyalists. In response, the Administration asks each of the 50 state Republican Party chairmen to make five “must hire” recommendations for federal jobs. Also, 100 appointments to federal boards and agencies were set aside to rebuild the political prestige of Republican congressional candidates who lost in 1980. (*The New York Times*, 06/11/1981)

**September**

The Senate unanimously confirms Sandra Day O’Connor on the 21st as the first female Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court. (*Reagan’s First Year*, p. 83)

**November**

On the 16th, C. Everett Koop is confirmed by the Senate, 68-24, as Surgeon General. Koop, 64, was initially disqualified from the post as the existing law required the Surgeon General to be under 64 years of age. After a bill was passed eliminating the minimum age requirement, opponents of the nomination questioned Koop’s training and expertise in public health programs. (*Reagan’s First Year*, p. 83)

The Heritage Foundation releases a 12-month “report card” on the Reagan presidency. The report, grading progress on the Administration’s 3,000-page policy manifesto “Mandate for Leadership,” places the heaviest blame for the Administration’s failures on personnel problems. The report charges that the sluggish pace of appointments, the placement of unqualified officials, and the dearth of committed Reaganites all lead to failed opportunities for many of the Administration’s policy initiatives. (*The Washington Post*, 11/22/1981)

**1982**

**August**

On the 2nd, Reagan announces that his former secretary Helene von Damm will replace James as Assistant to the President for Presidential Personnel. The White House announces that James will return to the private sector. (*The Washington Post*, 08/03/1982)

**1983**

**April**

President Reagan announces his intention to nominate James to the Board of Directors of the Communications Satellite Corporation for a term
ending at the CSC’s annual meeting in 1986. (*Public Papers of the President*, 04/05/1983)

**November**

James contributes to a study for the National Academy of Public Administration on the presidential appointments process. The report, entitled “America’s Unelected Government: Appointing the President’s Team,” emphasizes the difficulties in acquiring the most qualified person for each post. It suggests including more career civil servants and borrowing outstanding employees from private industries for temporary posts in the government as possible ways to improve the caliber of appointees. It also recommends that each party establish permanent lists of potential appointments so that the process does not take as long. (*The New York Times*, 11/12/1983)

**1984**

**March**

During Attorney General-designate Meese’s confirmation hearings, James is accused of wrongdoing in association with a real estate deal. In August 1982, James helped with the sale of Meese’s California home after Meese had fallen deeply into debt. Thomas J. Barrack, Jr., a real estate developer and a friend of James, arranged for the sale of the home within days of talking to James. A month after the sale of the home, Barrack came to Washington “at Pen James’s request” to discuss a job with the Administration. Barrack tells a congressional committee that there was “absolutely” no connection between the sale of the home and his appointment to the Interior Department. (*The New York Times*, 03/03/1984; *The Washington Post*, 03/08/1984)

At a Senate Judiciary hearing on the Meese nomination on the 30th, James tells the Committee that Meese had nothing to do with the recommendation of Barrack for a post at the Interior Department. He says, “Meese didn’t have the slightest idea about it.” James says he had been trying to get Barrack to join the Administration since the beginning of the term, but could not because of business matters in California. After the sale of Meese’s house, James again pushed for Barrack by asking then-Interior Secretary James Watt to look at his resume. When questioned about the appointment of John McKean, Meese’s personal tax accountant, to the U.S. Postal Service Board of Governors, James tells the XC-Committee he does not recall the process of the appointment. (*The Washington Post*, 03/31/1984)

**September**

On the 6th, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce admits it provided the White House in 1981 with a list of holdovers from the Carter Administration in the Environmental Protection Agency and the Departments of Labor, Energy and Justice whom they judged were “unsympathetic” to Reagan’s agenda. The Associated Press quotes James as saying he did not recall any such
list of federal employees that the Chamber of Commerce wanted fired. However, later documents show that a “hit list” was presented by Chamber President Richard Lesher to James in August 1981. (The New York Times, 09/06/1984; The Washington Post, 09/07/1984)

On the 19th, an independent counsel clears Edwin Meese of any wrongdoing in the appointment of Thomas Barrack to the Department of the Interior. (The New York Times, 09/20/1984)

1986

September

James joins the board of an alumni organization called “Reagan Appointees Alumni.” The goal of this organization is to assist in the Reagan agenda while out of Washington, D.C. Other members include Jeane Kirkpatrick, Lyn Nofziger, Helene Von Damm, and Peter Dailey. (PR Newswire, 09/24/1986)

December

Edwin Meese gives an off-the-record briefing on the Iran-Contra issue on the 11th to an exclusive audience of Reagan Administration alumni, including James, now working in the New York Area. According to James, these meetings occur about four times each year and are very candid. (The New York Times, 12/11/1986)

1987

December

James endorses a report calling for improvements in the presidential appointments process. The report, issued by the Public-Private Careers Project, recommends several changes to make the process easier, such as increasing salaries for government officials, streamlining financial disclosure forms, speeding up the FBI clearance process, and giving both parties federal funds after their respective conventions to begin the search process. (The Associated Press, 12/16/1987)

1988

February

Origins of Relationship with Reagan

- How did you first come to know Ronald Reagan?
- What was your earliest involvement in Reagan’s political career?

1980 Transition – Director of Personnel Management

- Did you have a role in the 1980 presidential campaign? How did you first get involved in the transition effort?
- How did you become the transition team’s Director of Personnel Management? What were your responsibilities in this position?
- With whom in the transition did you work most closely? Describe your relationships with other key individuals involved in the transition. Describe your daily personnel meetings with Edwin Meese, Michael Deaver, and James Baker.
- Comment on the role of your office in the transition organization. How much control did your office have over the initial cabinet appointments?
- How involved was Reagan in the selection process? Describe your bi-weekly meetings with Reagan.
- In selecting appointees, how important were the following qualities to Reagan—loyalty, work on the campaign, friendship, competence? How important were they to you?
- Discuss the role of the “Kitchen Cabinet” in the selection process.
- How did you feel about the charges that your office was conducting the transition at too slow a pace and that appointees were insufficiently conservative?

Office of Presidential Personnel

- Discuss the circumstances surrounding your selection as Assistant to the President for Personnel. How did your role and responsibilities change when you moved from the transition team to the Office of Presidential Personnel?
- How did your experience in the Nixon Administration’s Office of Administration help you prepare to service in the Reagan Office of Presidential Personnel?
- Describe the range and type of activities that most occupied your time.
- Discuss your relationships and interactions with other White House offices and staff (Office of Political Affairs, Office of Legislative Affairs, Office of White House Counsel, Chief of Staff, etc.). With whom in the White House did you work most closely?
- What attributes did President Reagan consider most important for his staff and Cabinet? How involved was President Reagan in making personnel decisions? Discuss the frequency and nature of your interactions with President Reagan.
- Comment on the role of Cabinet members and agency directors in personnel selection during the Reagan Administration. How much control did they have over the staffing of their departments and agencies? Does any particular personnel selection stand out in your memory? Which Cabinet members or agency heads were most involved in your personnel selection process?
Describe the process of personnel selection for the White House staff, the Cabinet, and sub-Cabinet posts. How were candidates identified and recruited? Who participated in the selection process? What was involved in the vetting process? What attributes did you look for in candidates? Did the process differ for domestic and foreign policy positions? How were confirmations handled?

Discuss the judicial selection process during the Reagan Administration and your role in it.

Did the Republican National Committee or other party organizations play a role in staffing the Administration? Did the Administration seek input from interest groups or outside organizations?

After the OPP

What led to your decision to leave the Administration in August 1982?

Discuss the confirmation hearings of Edwin Meese for Attorney General.

Discuss the issue of the Chamber of Commerce’s so-called “hit list.”

Comment on the creation of the “Reagan Appointees Alumni.” What was your role in the organization? Did this organization have any influence on personnel or policy in the White House?

Were you still involved in recruiting for the Reagan Administration after you left your post?

The Reagan Presidency in Retrospect

How different were Reagan and Nixon as leaders?

Discuss your observations of Reagan’s decision-making style. What were the distinctive characteristics of Reagan as a public leader, a legislative leader, and a party leader?

What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Reagan presidency?

What features of the Reagan presidency were missed or misunderstood by the press?

How should the Reagan presidency be viewed in history?
TIMELINES

- E. Pendleton James Timeline, prepared by Jeffrey L. Chidester, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 10/07/2003.

1980 Transition


OFFICE OF PRESIDENTIAL PERSONNEL


POLITICS OF PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTMENTS


- George Lardner, Jr., “Senate Confirms Donovan, 80-17; Last of Cabinet,” The Washington Post, 02/04/1981.


