

CAPITAL COMMENT

INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE

Ed Meese Disappeared, and Then There Were Two

Edwin Meese III, counselor to President Reagan, has become the Hamilton Jordan of today's White House: Nobody knows what he does except stay on the good side of the President.

With William Clark taking over the National Security Council and with the White House office of domestic policy in disarray, Meese is stranded without any significant operational authority. When asked about Meese, White House colleagues invariably say something about his being "free to concentrate on the issues." As White House watchers know, that is the road to oblivion.

When Meese first arrived in Washington, he was warmly greeted by the press. His availability and chubby countenance imparted a sense of trustworthiness and a lack of Machiavellian guile. The *New York Times* said, "He is very much a manager. 'Disciplined' and 'organized' are the adjectives used most often to describe him." The *Christian Science Monitor* reported, "Mr. Meese will, in effect, be 'deputy President.'" TRB in the *New Republic* said of Meese, "You won't see his name so often in the headlines or his comfortable, intelligent, slightly pudgy face on the front page. He is merely general manager of the United States. He gets his authority because he is a detail man. . . ."

During the first year of the Reagan administration, the Big Three—Meese, chief of staff James A. Baker III, and deputy staff chief Michael K. Deaver—worked in harmony. But the White House was then focusing its attention almost exclusively on taxes and the budget.

At the end of 1981 and beginning of 1982, the White House was overrun by events and crises—Libyan hit squads, turmoil in Central and South America, mounting unemployment, growing deficits, controversy over a new voting-rights bill, and debates over defense and nuclear parity.

It became evident that Meese's talents were not in management and organization. Around the White House, Meese's briefcase was referred to as a "bottomless pit" into which papers vanished.



James Baker (standing) and Edwin Meese
Government by Triumvirate Doesn't Work

Meese was instrumental in several major miscalculations: proposing Social Security cutbacks that were withdrawn almost as soon as they were unveiled; allowing the President to sleep while US planes shot down two attacking Libyan warplanes over the Gulf of Sidra; adopting, then reversing a plan to give tax exemptions to segregated private schools. Meese also signed a fund-raising letter on White House stationery on behalf of the conservative Heritage Foundation—an action reeking of ideological politics.

Meanwhile Baker, the smooth, trim-looking Houston lawyer and experienced Washington political hand, came to the forefront as the key figure in devising legislative strategy, administering the White House, and managing media affairs. Today, the Big Three is a shell of what it was, and Meese is the loser.

In building a "troika" system, Reagan adopted an innovative administrative design, certainly worth trying. But now, well into its second year, the trial has run its course. When Reagan declared at a press conference last November that his White House staff was "a very happy group" and that there was "no animus . . . no bickering or back-stabbing going on," Washington reporters, normally at least somewhat self-contained in deference to the presidential office, hooted with laughter.

Why is the Big Three system not working?

■ The troika system conjures a popular image of a President divorced from significant decisions, dominated by his senior staff, and insulated from unpopular developments.

■ It clogs the policymaking channels. Every high-priority

White House memo is routed to each of the Big Three, who, in turn, must act on it.

■ It encourages in-house cliques and leads to empire-building. Each of the triumvirate has his own loyal staff jockeying for jurisdictional turf.

■ It underscores divisions and disagreements within the White House because of personal and philosophical differences among the three senior aides. Ideologically, Meese is the hard-line conservative, Baker the moderate, and Deaver the swing man, whose primary concern is the happiness and well-being of Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

■ It carries the potential for political disaster. The inflated stature of presidential aides during the past several administrations and the centralization of authority within the White House tend to convince many aides that they are invulnerable to outside forces.

■ It inhibits the orderly formulation of policy. Under the initial setup, the chief White House foreign- and domestic-policy advisers reported to Reagan through Meese, who had neither the specialized staff nor the personal background to handle the kind of interagency issues that rise to the presidential level. With Meese's loss of influence, the principal policy advisers have lost direct access to the President.

It is uncertain where Meese will go from here. There are rumors that he will be appointed Secretary of Defense or Attorney General or be named to succeed CIA Director William J. Casey. Yet the New Right is anxious to keep Meese in the White House, where he is their main line to the President. It seems unlikely, however, that he will continue to play the role of a wandering troubadour reciting sonnets to the administration.

Recalling how Meese bested John Sears for the top spot in the Reagan campaign, a White House aide counseled: "Don't sell him short."

Nonetheless, Meese has discovered that Washington politics are not the same as state politics. Hamilton Jordan made a similar discovery—but by then it was too late.