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The DiIulio Letter

October 2002

Esquire

Life In The Gulag - Politex, 4 Dec 2002

On Monday we learned that in a forthcoming *Esquire* story John DiIulio, former Bush director of the White House Office Of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, says that politics, not policy run the Bush White House, that speeches come first and policy is hastily and sketchily constructed later, that Bush is kept on the short leash of far right preconceptions of the world that often don't jibe with reality, and that fear of Karl Rove prevents staffers from providing him with news from the real world that might contradict his extreme, conservative vision.

In DiIulio's words, "there is no precedent in any modern White House for what is going on in this one: complete lack of a policy apparatus. Besides the tax cut, which was cut and dried during the campaign, and the education bill, which was really a Ted Kennedy bill, the administration has not done much, either in absolute terms or in comparison to previous administrations at this stage, on domestic policy. What you've got is everything, and I mean everything, being run by the political arm. It's the reign of the Mayberry Machiavellis. [They] consistently talked and acted as if the height of political sophistication consisted in reducing every issue to its simplest black-and-white terms for public consumption, then steering legislative initiatives or policy proposals as far right as possible." The former White House director confides, "I heard many, many staff discussions but not three meaningful, substantive policy discussions. There were no actual policy white papers on domestic issues. There were, truth be told, only a couple of people in the West Wing who worried at all about policy substance and analysis ... Every modern presidency moves on the fly, but on social policy and related issues, the lack of even basic policy knowledge, and the only casual interest in knowing more, was somewhat breathtaking: discussions by fairly senior people who meant Medicaid but were talking Medicare; near-instant shifts from discussing any actual policy pros and cons to discussing political communications, media strategy, et cetera ." DiIulio goes on to tell us that "the remarkably slapdash character of the Office of Homeland Security, with the nine months of arguing that no department was needed, with the sudden, politically timed reversal in June ..."

On October 24, John DiIulio, a former high-level official in the Bush administration, sent the letter below to *Esquire* Washington correspondent Ron Suskind. The letter was a key source of Suskind's story about Karl Rove, politics and policymaking in the Bush administration, "Why Are These Men Laughing," which appears in the January 2003 issue of *Esquire*. On Monday, December 3, White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said that the charges contained in the story were "groundless and baseless." After initially standing by his assertions, DiIulio himself later issued an "apology." *Esquire* stands strongly behind Suskind and his important story.

CONFIDENTIAL

To: Ron Suskind

From: John DiIulio

Subject: Your next essay on the Bush administration

Date: October 24, 2002

Dear Ron:

For/On the Record

My perspective on the president and the administration reflects both my experiences at the White House and my views as a political scientist and policy scholar. Regarding the former, I spent a couple one-on-one hours with then-Governor Bush during a visit he made to Philadelphia a few months before the Republican Convention there. I helped with certain campaign speeches and with certain speeches once he became president. I spent time with the president in briefings, in meetings with groups, and on certain trips. I was there in the White House during the first 180 days. I was an Assistant to the President, and attended many, though by no means all, senior staff meetings. I was not at all a close "insider" but I was very much on the inside. I observed and heard a great deal that concerned policy issues and political matters well outside my own issue sets. Regarding the latter, I have studied American government and public policy and administration for over twenty years. I have worked and run research programs at both liberal and conservative think tanks, developed community programs through national non-profit groups, and so forth.

In my view, President Bush is a highly admirable person of enormous personal decency. He is a godly man and a moral leader. He is much, much smarter than some people-including some of his own supporters and advisers-seem to suppose. He inspires personal trust, loyalty, and confidence in those around him. In many ways, he is all heart. Clinton talked "I feel your pain." But as Bush showed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, he truly does feel deeply for others and loves this country with a passion.

The little things speak legions. Notice how he decided to let the detainees come home from China and did not jump all over them for media purposes. I could cite a dozen such examples of his dignity and personal goodness. Or I recall how, in Philly, following a 3-hour block party on July 4, 2001, following hours among the children, youth, and families of prisoners, we were running late for the next event. He stopped, however, to take a picture with a couple of men who were cooking ribs all day. "C'mon," he said, "those guys have been doing hard work all day there." It's my favorite-and in some ways, my most telling-picture of who he is as a man and a leader who pays attention to the little things that convey respect and decency toward others.

But the contrast with Clinton is two-sided. As Joe Klein has so strongly captured him, Clinton was "the natural," a leader with a genuine interest in the policy process who encouraged information-rich decision-making. Clinton was the policy-wonk-in-chief. The Clinton administration drowned in policy intellectuals and teemed with knowledgeable people interested in making government work. Every domestic issue drew multiple policy analyses that certainly weighted politics, media messages, legislative strategy, et cetera, but also strongly weighted policy-relevant information, stimulated substantive policy debate, and

put a premium on policy knowledge. That is simply not Bush's style. It fits not at all with his personal cum presidential character. The Bush West Wing is very nearly at the other end of this Clinton policy-making continuum.

Besides the tax cut, which was cut-and-dried during the campaign, and the education bill, which was really a Ted Kennedy bill, the administration has not done much, either in absolute terms or in comparison to previous administrations at this stage, on domestic policy. There is a virtual absence as yet of any policy accomplishments that might, to a fair-minded non-partisan, count as the flesh on the bones of so-called compassionate conservatism. There is still two years, maybe six, for them to do more and better on domestic policy, and, specifically, on the compassion agenda. And, needless to say, 9/11, and now the global war on terror and the new homeland and national security plans, must be weighed in the balance.

But, as I think Andy Card himself told you in so many words, even allowing for those huge contextual realities, they could stand to find ways of inserting more serious policy fiber into the West Wing diet, and engage much less in on-the-fly policy-making by speech-making. They are almost to an individual nice people, and there are among them several extremely gifted persons who do indeed know-and care-a great deal about actual policy-making, administrative reform, and so forth. But they have been, for whatever reasons, organized in ways that make it hard for policy-minded staff, including colleagues (even secretaries) of cabinet agencies, to get much West Wing traction, or even get a non-trivial hearing.

In this regard, at the six-month senior staff retreat on July 9, 2001, an explicit discussion ensued concerning how to emulate more strongly the Clinton White House's press, communications, and rapid-response media relations-how better to wage, if you will, the permanent campaign that so defines the modern presidency regardless of who or which party occupies the Oval Office. I listened and was amazed. It wasn't more press, communications, media, legislative strategizing, and such that they needed. Maybe the Clinton people did that better, though, surely, they were less disciplined about it and leaked more to the media and so on. No, what they needed, I thought then and still do now, was more policy-relevant information, discussion, and deliberation.

In eight months, I heard many, many staff discussions, but not three meaningful, substantive policy discussions. There were no actual policy white papers on domestic issues. There were, truth be told, only a couple of people in the West Wing who worried at all about policy substance and analysis, and they were even more overworked than the stereotypical, non-stop, 20-hour-a-day White House staff. Every modern presidency moves on the fly, but, on social policy and related issues, the lack of even basic policy knowledge, and the only casual interest in knowing more, was somewhat breathtaking-discussions by fairly senior people who meant Medicaid but were talking Medicare; near-instant shifts from discussing any actual policy pros and cons to discussing political communications, media strategy, et cetera. Even quite junior staff would sometimes hear quite senior staff pooh-pooh any need to dig deeper for pertinent information on a given issue.

Likewise, every administration at some point comes to think of the White House as its own private tree house, to define itself as "us" versus "them" on Capitol Hill, or in the media, or what have you, and, before 100 days are out, to vest ever more organizational and operational authority with the White House's political, press, and communications people,

both senior and junior. I think, however, that the Bush administration-maybe because they were coming off Florida and the election controversy, maybe because they were so unusually tight-knit and "Texas," maybe because the chief of staff, Andy Card, was more a pure staff process than a staff leader or policy person, or maybe for other reasons I can't recognize-was far more inclined in that direction, and became progressively more so as the months pre-9/11 wore on.

This gave rise to what you might call Mayberry Machiavellis-staff, senior and junior, who consistently talked and acted as if the height of political sophistication consisted in reducing every issue to its simplest, black-and-white terms for public consumption, then steering legislative initiatives or policy proposals as far right as possible. These folks have their predecessors in previous administrations (left and right, Democrat and Republican), but, in the Bush administration, they were particularly unfettered.

I could cite a half-dozen examples, but, on the so-called faith bill, they basically rejected any idea that the president's best political interests-not to mention the best policy for the country-could be served by letting centrist Senate Democrats in on the issue, starting with a bipartisan effort to review the implementation of the kindred law (called "charitable choice") signed in 1996 by Clinton. For a fact, had they done that, six months later they would have had a strongly bipartisan copycat bill to extend that law. But, over-generalizing the lesson from the politics of the tax cut bill, they winked at the most far-right House Republicans who, in turn, drafted a so-called faith bill (H.R. 7, the Community Solutions Act) that (or so they thought) satisfied certain fundamentalist leaders and beltway libertarians but bore few marks of "compassionate conservatism" and was, as anybody could tell, an absolute political non-starter. It could pass the House only on a virtual party-line vote, and it could never pass the Senate, even before Jeffords switched.

Not only that, but it reflected neither the president's own previous rhetoric on the idea, nor any of the actual empirical evidence that recommended policies promoting greater public/private partnerships involving community-serving religious organizations. I said so, wrote memos, and so on for the first six weeks. But, hey, what's that fat, out-of-the-loop professor guy know; besides, he says he'll be gone in six months. As one senior staff member chided me at a meeting at which many junior staff were present and all ears, "John, get a faith bill, any faith bill." Like college students who fall for the colorful, opinionated, but intellectually third-rate professor, you could see these 20- and 30-something junior White House staff falling for the Mayberry Machiavellis. It was all very disheartening to this old, Madison-minded American government professor.

Madison aside, even Machiavelli might have a beef. The West Wing staff actually believed that they could pass the flawed bill, get it through conference, and get it to the president's desk to sign by the summer. Instead, the president got a political black eye when they could easily have handed him a big bipartisan political victory. The best media events were always the bipartisan ones anyway, like the president's visit to the U.S. Mayors Conference in Detroit in June 2001. But my request to have him go there was denied three times on the grounds that it would "play badly" or "give the Democrat mayors a chance to bash him on other issues." Nothing of the sort happened; it was a great success, as was having Philly's black Democratic mayor, John Street, in the gallery next to Mrs. Bush in February 2001 at the president's first Budget Address. But they could not see it, and instead went back to

courting conservative religious leaders and groups.

The "faith bill" saga also illustrates the relative lack of substantive concern for policy and administration. I had to beg to get a provision written into the executive orders that would require us to conduct an actual information-gathering effort related to the president's interest in the policy. With the exception of some folks at OMB, nobody cared a fig about the five-agency performance audit, and we got less staff help on it than went into any two PR events or such. Now, of course, the document the effort produced (*Unlevel Playing Field*) is cited all the time, and frames the administrative reform agenda that-or so the Mayberry Machiavellis had insisted-had no value.

Even more revealing than what happened during the first 180 days is what did not, especially on the compassion agenda beyond the faith bill and focusing on children. Remember "No child left behind"? That was a Bush campaign slogan. I believe it was his heart, too. But translating good impulses into good policy proposals requires more than whatever somebody thinks up in the eleventh hour before a speech is to be delivered, or whatever symbolic politics plan-"communities of character" and such-gets generated by the communications, political strategy, and other political shops.

During the campaign, for instance, the president had mentioned Medicaid explicitly as one program on which Washington might well do more. I co-edited a whole (boring!) Brookings volume on Medicaid; some people inside thought that universal health care for children might be worth exploring, especially since, truth be told, the existing laws take us right up to that policy border. They could easily have gotten in behind some proposals to implement existing Medicaid provisions that benefit low-income children. They could have fashioned policies for the working poor. The list is long. Long, and fairly complicated, especially when-as they stipulated from the start-you want to spend little or no new public money on social welfare, and you have no real process for doing meaningful domestic policy analysis and deliberation. It's easier in that case to forget Medicaid refinements and react to calls for a "PBOR," patients' bill of rights, or whatever else pops up.

Some are inclined to blame the high political-to-policy ratios of this administration on Karl Rove. Some in the press view Karl as some sort of prince of darkness; actually, he is basically a nice and good-humored man. And some staff members, senior and junior, are awed and cowed by Karl's real or perceived powers. They self-censor lots for fear of upsetting him, and, in turn, few of the president's top people routinely tell the president what they really think if they think that Karl will be brought up short in the bargain. Karl is enormously powerful, maybe the single most powerful person in the modern, post-Hoover era ever to occupy a political advisor post near the Oval Office. The Republican base constituencies, including beltway libertarian policy elites and religious right leaders, trust him to keep Bush "43" from behaving like Bush "41" and moving too far to the center or inching at all center-left. Their shared fiction, supported by zero empirical electoral studies, is that "41" lost in '92 because he lost these right-wing fans. There are not ten House districts in America where either the libertarian litany or the right-wing religious policy creed would draw majority popular approval, and, most studies suggest, Bush "43" could have done better versus Gore had he stayed more centrist, but, anyway, the fiction is enshrined as fact. Little happens on any issue without Karl's okay, and, often, he supplies such policy substance as the administration puts out. Fortunately, he is not just a largely self-taught, hyper-political

guy, but also a very well informed guy when it comes to certain domestic issues. (Whether, as some now assert, he even has such sway in national security, homeland security, and foreign affairs, I cannot say.)

Karl was at his political and policy best, I think, in steering the president's stem-cell research decision, as was the president himself, who really took this issue on board with an unusual depth of reading, reflection, and staff deliberation. Personally, I would have favored a position closer to the Catholic Church's on the issue, but this was one instance where the administration really took pains with both politics and policy, invited real substantive knowledge into the process, and so forth. It was almost as if it took the most highly charged political issue of its kind to force them to take policy-relevant knowledge seriously, to have genuine deliberation.

Contrast that, however, with the remarkably slap-dash character of the Office of Homeland Security, with the nine months of arguing that no department was needed, with the sudden, politically-timed reversal in June, and with the fact that not even that issue, the most significant reorganization of the federal government since the creation of the Department of Defense, has received more than talking-points caliber deliberation. This was, in a sense, the administration problem in miniature: Ridge was the decent fellow at the top, but nobody spent the time to understand that an EOP entity without budgetary or statutory authority can't "coordinate" over 100 separate federal units, no matter how personally close to the president its leader is, no matter how morally right they feel the mission is, and no matter how inconvenient the politics of telling certain House Republican leaders we need a big new federal bureaucracy might be.

The good news, however, is that the fundamentals are pretty good-the president's character and heart, the decent, well-meaning people on staff, Karl's wonkish alter-ego, and the fact that, a year after 9/11 and with a White House that can find time enough to raise \$140 million for campaigns, it's becoming fair to ask, on domestic policy and compassionate conservatism, "Where's the beef?"

Whether because they will eventually be forced to defend the president's now thin record on domestic policy and virtually empty record on compassionate conservatism, or for other reasons, I believe that the best may well be yet to come from the Bush administration. But, in my view, they will not get there without some significant reforms to the policy-lite inter-personal and organizational dynamics of the place.

Shalom,

John

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