As presidential scholar James Pfiffner succinctly put it: ‘A chief of staff is essential in the modern White House.’

Thirty-eight years of experience – nineteen White House chiefs of staff – have, in this author’s view, demonstrated a number of principles for effectiveness in fulfilling that central responsibility.

A chief of staff needs to be familiar with the unique pressures and pitfalls of public life in Washington.

The chief of staff needs to have firm, four-way support: not only from the president but from the first lady, the vice president, and the vice president’s spouse as well.

The chief of staff should be someone who is not only close to the president but also very familiar with those who operated the campaign.

The chief of staff has comprehensive control over the activities of the White House staff.

None of the policy centers of the White House – including the National Security Council apparat and the offices of the first lady and the vice president – can be allowed to work independently of the rest of the institution.

All presentations to the president are subject to the chief of staff’s review.

The chief of staff controls the president’s schedule.

The chief of staff controls the president’s doorway.

Review, by the chief of staff’s office, of all papers that come out of the president’s office is as important as scrutiny of those that come in.”
Ibid, ¶ 7, line 1 – “The chief will set up a special system for controlling the White House responses to congressional mail that contains important policy questions.”

Ibid., ¶ 8, line 1 – “The chief of staff may wish to have two or three deputy chiefs of staff.”

p. 243, ¶ 2, line 1 – “The chief of staff cannot avoid dealing with Congress.”

Ibid., ¶ 3, line 1 – “Perhaps the chief of staff’s most sensitive judgement call is deciding where to draw the line: when to take an issue to the president and when to settle it before it goes that far.”

p. 244, ¶ 3, line 1 – “In the decisionmaking process, the chief of staff is always an honest broker. But only an honest broker? By no means.”

Ibid., ¶ 4, line 1 – “The chief of staff must be possessed of the exceptional sensitivity to recognize a presidential command that is given in unthinking anger, frustration, or exhaustion – and lay it aside.”

Ibid., ¶ 6, line 1 – “The chief of staff or one of the deputy chiefs of staff goes on each presidential journey.”

p. 245, ¶ 1, line 1 – “For nearly half a century it has been the chief of staff’s responsibility to convene White House meetings.”

Ibid., ¶ 2, line 9 – “Each chief of staff and each president will come their own agreement on how public the chief’s persona should be.”

Ibid., ¶ 3, line 1 – “The chief of staff must continually build bridges to the cabinet.”

p. 246, ¶ 3, line 1 – “The chief of staff, finally, runs one more risk: that of becoming insensitive to the perquisites and privileges that necessarily accompany his status.”