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From: sbwhoeop [redacted]
Sent: Wednesday, March 10, 2010 8:44 AM
To: H
Subject: H: FYI, dysfunctional NSC. Recall, Ed Luce started the whole round a month ago. Sid

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Palace intrigue undermines Team Obama

By Edward Luce in Washington

Published: March 9 2010 17:52 | Last updated: March 9 2010 17:52

Franklin Roosevelt once said that people working for the US president should have a "passion for anonymity". Someone forgot to tell the team working for Barack Obama. In the past few weeks, senior White House officials and their allies have been finessing profiles in various outlets exonerating one or other of the big figures surrounding America's 44th president from blame for what has gone awry.

In view of the commentary it might be tempting to conclude that there are two people who really count in the Obama administration – Rahm Emanuel, the inimitable chief of staff, and David Axelrod, the president's loyal senior adviser. In fact, as this paper reported last month, there are two others, Robert Gibbs, the head of communications, and Valerie Jarrett, also a senior adviser, who are widely seen as comprising the remainder of Mr Obama's inner circle. But it is Messrs Axelrod and Emanuel who have dominated the limelight. Missing conspicuously from the roll call of recent weeks are Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state, Bob Gates, secretary of defence, Jim Jones, the national security adviser, and Tim Geithner, secretary of the Treasury – to name a few.

At the key Oval Office meeting last summer between Mr Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, in which the two fell out over the US demand that Israel freeze its settlements, Mr Obama was accompanied by two senior aides. Suffice to say that they were neither Mrs Clinton nor George Mitchell, Mr Obama's envoy to the anaemic Arab-Israeli peace process.

Why should this matter to people outside the Beltway? The Washington pastime of wondering who is up and who down dates back to the presidency of George Washington. Almost as old is the tendency of incoming administrations gradually to lose discipline as things start to go wrong.

There are two reasons why the rampant growth of palace intrigue in Mr Obama's White House should matter to non-political junkies. First, it shows that Team Obama is losing its discipline and cohesion. Last autumn, Mr Obama issued an edict banning White House staff from co-operating with media profiles of figures inside the administration. Mr Obama was reportedly worried that it conveyed disunity.

But the rule is honoured more in the breach than the observance. The abundance of unauthorised leaks undermines Mr Obama's style of doing business – collecting advice from a "team of rivals" but keeping that rivalry within the family. That worked well during the campaign and held up until the shock Democratic defeat in the Massachusetts Senate election six weeks ago. Since then it has disintegrated.

Second, it reinforces the view – already widespread among close allies of the administration – that Mr Obama runs an excessively centralised operation. Recent attention has focused on fissures, real or imagined, between Mr Axelrod and Mr Emanuel as a proxy for the divisions between those who were on Mr Obama's campaign and those who were not. This is mirrored at the National Security Council between Denis McDonough, its chief of staff, who was constantly with Mr Obama during the campaign, and national security adviser Mr Jones, a former general who has never been near a hustings.

Officials award high marks to the inter-agency process managed by Tom Donilon, deputy national security adviser, and Jim Steinberg, Mrs Clinton's deputy. This keeps trains on time in a complex inter-departmental system. But they express concern about the source of Mr Obama's advice on foreign policy. "The president has at least four national security advisers and Jim Jones isn't the most important," says a former Clinton administration official.

Fissures are also visible in the relationship between Mr Obama's former campaign staff and those who worked for Mrs Clinton – a bitter rivalry eventually bridged by the two candidates but which did not extend to their underlings.

Unsurprisingly, relations between the state department and the White House are not always smooth.

So where will this end up? As Mr Emanuel might put it, nothing succeeds like success. If Mr Obama can finally pull off a healthcare bill in the next three weeks, Team Obama will stick together until the next crisis. It may even break out the champagne. If healthcare fails, the recriminations will be far from anonymous.

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