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Obama's Right Hand: Behind the scenes, White House Chief of Staff Pete Rouse is invaluable to the President

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Members of the political press might be surprised to know that one of the White House officials least likely to grant an interview was once a reporter himself—for the Colby Echo. Through more than 40 years since he was an Echo sportswriter, White House Chief of Staff Pete Rouse ’68 has remained largely aloof from the news media. It’s a practice that has served him well as he has risen through Washington’s ranks and scaled the pinnacle of power in the Obama White House. >
In introducing his new chief of staff, Obama pointed to Rouse’s abilities to find solutions to difficult problems. “There’s a saying around the White House: ‘Let’s let Pete fix it,’” the president said.

Rouse, who was named interim White House chief of staff Oct. 1, has continued to avoid the limelight as he works on the inside to promote President Barack Obama’s agenda.

That makes Rouse, 64, the polar opposite of his predecessor, Rahm Emanuel, the high-profile former congressman who exited the West Wing to run for mayor of Chicago. Unlike the fiery and voluble Emanuel, Rouse has risen to the top in Washington by working the inside game—as Senator Tom Daschle’s chief of staff for 19 years and then as chief of staff for Obama when Obama was elected to the Senate in 2004.

“Pete Rouse is one of the great mystery men of Washington,” said Peter Hart ’64, the public opinion analyst who conducted polling this year for NBC and the Wall Street Journal. “He does his job exceptionally well, and he does it without fanfare. In Washington, there are workhorses and there are show horses. Pete Rouse is the ultimate workhorse.”

From behind the scenes, Rouse helped mastermind Obama’s unexpected rise from a freshman senator to the nation’s first African-American president. “I look for real smart people, people who place a premium on getting the job done, as opposed to getting credit,” Obama told the Washington Post in 2008. “My chief of staff in the Senate, Pete Rouse, Tom Daschle’s old chief of staff, is as well-connected, and as well-known and as popular and as smart and as savvy a person as there is on Capitol Hill. But it is completely ego-free.”

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For all of the president’s public confidence, Rouse’s appointment sparked speculation from political bloggers. “Those who have been with Obama the longest are very excited,” wrote Marc Ambinder, former politics editor of The Atlantic magazine. “Rouse is brilliant, has a policy compass that resembles Obama’s in the Senate, and seems genuinely concerned for how staffers adjust to the crucible of the institution.”

One thing is certain: Rouse will have plenty to fix in coming months. Rouse, who served as an advisor to Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign and then became part of his White House inner circle in 2009, was elevated to chief of staff just a month before the November midterm elections. The election results were sobering for Obama, now forced to retreat and to work with the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives.

Sandy Maisel, the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Government and director of Colby’s Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement, says Rouse is the right man in these trying times for Obama. While heading up the Senate offices of Daschle and Obama, he was known as “the 101st senator” for his ability to move legislation.

“Pete is Mr. Inside and not a public persona, which is what Obama needs right now,” Maisel said. “He can work with Congress and has the reputation for working well with the Republicans. That becomes more important, as Obama needs to tone down his partisanship to work with the Republican House and a more closely divided Senate.”

Rouse’s desire to ply his trade away from the spotlight harks back to the Brownlow Commission’s 1938 report on federal government reorganization, which recommended White House staffers have “a passion for anonymity.”

It hasn’t always been that way, says G. Calvin Mackenzie, the Goldfarb Family Distinguished Professor of American Government, noting several high-profile congressmen who have served in that role: Leon Panetta with Clinton, Howard Baker with Reagan, Donald Rumsfeld with Ford.

Said Mackenzie, “Rouse is doing what he has done his entire career—working behind the scenes.”

Rouse, who declined to be interviewed for this article, is single and lives with his Maine Coon cats in Washington. He grew up in New Haven, Conn., the son of Yale University academics. His father, Irving, was...
an archeology professor, and his mother, the daughter of Japanese immigrants, taught at the Institute of Oriental Languages. Rouse's maternal grandparents were confined to an internment camp in Arizona by the U.S. government during World War II.

At Colby Rouse's role as an Echo sports-writer was a natural for a serious baseball player—Colby's third baseman who was also known for his prowess playing stickball in the quad behind Miller Library, according to Robert Rudnick '69, Rouse's roommate and longtime friend. Rouse was among two independents (non-fraternity men) named by the Echo in 1967 among the top 10 players in the interfraternity league, where he was known for his “blazing fastball and explosive bat.” Rudnick said he last saw Rouse in January 2010, when Rouse spoke at Colby's Sloop Hero Society event at the Union Club of Boston.

“He spoke to a vast audience, and he didn’t tout himself,” said Rudnick, a partner at the international law firm Shearman & Sterling and emeritus member of Colby's Board of Trustees. “He told us about how he was learning the ropes [in the White House,] the struggles they faced, and how they approached them. He was quite engaging. Generally folks in politics are much more guarded.”

That event was closed to the press.

After majoring in history at Colby, Rouse’s analytic skills were further developed in graduate programs at the London School of Economics and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

He met Daschle while both were congressional aids to Sen. James Abourezk in 1973. But then Rouse found a home in Alaska, where his maternal grandparents settled after emigrating from Japan, as Lt. Gov. Terry Miller’s chief of staff. Miller, whom Rouse met while studying at Harvard, was his only Republican boss.

“He [Miller] was a very intelligent guy and a progressive Republican,” Rouse told the Anchorage Daily News in a rare interview in 2009. “And Alaska at the time, there were different philosophies up there. I shared his basic world view, I didn’t agree with everything, but on balance I felt he had the right vision for Alaska and the right philosophical approach.”

Rouse returned to Washington in 1985 to head up Daschle’s staff, starting a 19-year run with the Democratic senator, including the seven years that Daschle served as Senate majority leader. When Daschle lost in 2004, Rouse was ready to retire from government work. But reports say Obama pleaded with Rouse to head his Senate office, tapping the experience of the trusted Senate hand.

Now Rouse will head Obama’s governing team as the president addresses the sluggish economy, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a resurgent Republican party. Stuart Rothenberg ’70, a political commentator and editor of The Rothenberg Political Report, a nonpartisan newsletter on U.S. politics, says Rouse is faced with quite a challenge.

“Peter will be helping the president navigate these more complicated waters,” Rothenberg said. “At the end of the day, it depends on the president’s ability to talk to multiple groups with different views and get each to nod their heads. And Peter will be very much a part of that discussion.”

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