

Nomination Forms Online

That the White House had no institutional memory—the problem prompting the White House Interview Program (WHIP)—represents just one area in which the White House 2001 Project affected the presidential transition. In appointments, the Pew Charitable Trusts identified a second transition problem. In 1996, the Twentieth Century Fund¹ produced a blue-ribbon study outlining several issues undermining the appeal of government appointment. The study, entitled *Obstacle Course: The Report of the Twentieth Century Task Force on Presidential Appointment Process* (Twentieth Century Fund 1996), convinced Pew to focus on the recruitment of presidential nominees. As part of that initiative, they contemplated a computer program that would reduce the burden placed on nominees by filing numerous, intrusive, and repetitive questionnaires.

Just the Beginning

Identifying the general problem and a generic solution, however, represented just the beginning. While *Obstacle Course* had highlighted problems, it provided few details. No one, either inside or outside of government, for example, knew exactly how many questions nominees answered. No one knew how

many committee forms nominees completed. No one knew how many committees used more than one questionnaire. No one understood the degree of repetition nominees faced. In addition, *Obstacle Course* had not outlined the process. No one, inside or outside of government, for example, knew how administrations recruited or vetted nominees. No one, even, had a clear view of how many positions in government involved presidential discretion. It became clear that any solution to burdensome inquiry would first require a much broader and coordinated research program to uncover the institutional details surrounding and creating a context for the inquiry of nominees.

Immediately, the Twentieth Century Fund opted out of the broader task as well as software development. In response, the Pew Charitable Trusts turned to WHIP. Through WHIP, we had developed the

resources necessary to uncover the appointment process. In fact, part of the interview program planned to build an institutional memory for two executive actors—Presidential Personnel and the White House Counsel. By rearranging interviews, Martha Kumar could produce the raw materials necessary for identifying the process we would need to understand. She quickly established valuable relationships in the Office of Government Ethics and among Senate committees.

We adopted this project because it clearly required a scholarly group and because it would further underwrite efforts to build a useful institutional memory. Eventually, we would turn over some parts of the process description to a supporting partner, the Presidential Appointee Initiative (PAI, another Pew transition project), but the initial work on identifying appointment details laid a foundation for eventually developing a software solution. Using this groundwork and with Pew's support at the core, the newly renamed White House 2001 Project developed three strategically important partnerships with the James A. Baker Institute, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and PAI.

Building the NFO Software

Two final tasks remained to complete our *Nomination Forms Online* (NFO) software. First, we had to develop and apply a software framework to the actual identification of inquiries. The article in this symposium, "Already Buried and Sinking Fast," represents the fifth in a series of such reports detailing inquiry, identifying the level of repetitiveness nominees face, and clarifying other reform efforts. Second, with the specifications and questions organized, we needed a software partner for NFO. We selected a training enterprise in India, Boston Education and Software Technologies, and its American subsidiary, Infinity Software.

These five reports on the inquiry process summarize a more detailed research effort tracing the connections between individual questions on some 32 questionnaires that nominees can access through the NFO program (see Sullivan 2001b). Through that research, we identified some 1,700 questions that nominees might face and that our programming would need to include. Depending upon the position sought, nominees end up filing forms with around 300 questions from this pool.

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In the typical situation, nominees first use an inventory of forms to identify which ones they believe they must file.

NFO then builds a “workspace” of questions to answer and a work inventory to keep track of what they have finished. The software will respond initially to around 25 questions from the cluster of forms that make up the “White House Personal Data Statement.” This cluster focuses primarily on uncovering conflicts of interest. Having filed these forms, the typical nominee then files a cluster of forms built around the FBI national security background check, the SF-86. This cluster covers the entire range of the nominee’s background and associates. For example, some questions on the SF-86 require the nominee to detail information about all members of their extended family (including in-laws), including those deceased, and any person who resides with them. After completing this cluster, the software then identifies every person listed on this form not born in the U. S. and builds and answers a separate “Immigration Addendum” for each. The SF-86 cluster accounts for around 125 questions, many of which require complex responses (e.g., tabular information with several columns of separate inquiries).

A third, more specialized questionnaire focuses on financial disclosure. Covering some 20 questions, the SF-278 details the nominee’s assets, including stocks and bonds, financial trusts, recent transactions, and real estate. This form also outlines financial information for the immediate family of the nominee. A response to any one of the SF-278’s questions may require as much as 50 separate pages.

For those 1200 or so presidential nominees requiring Senate consent, *NFO* then provides answers to questions proffered by the committee of jurisdiction. Typically, these questionnaires constitute a combination of questions

You may find White House 2001 Project studies of the Inquiry Process at <whitehouse2001.org>:

Sullivan, Terry. 2001. “Analyzing Questionnaires for Nominees.” *Reports from the White House 2001 Project, Nomination Forms Online Program*. Study 8.

—. 2001. “Fabulous Formless Darkness—Presidential Nominees and the Morass of Inquiry.” *The Brookings Review* 12(2): 22–27.

—. 2001. “In Full View—The Inquiry of Presidential Nominees.” *Reports from the White House 2001 Project, Nomination Forms Online Program*. Study 15.

—. 2001. “Repetitiveness, Redundancy, and Reform—Rationalizing the Inquiry of Presidential Nominees.” In *Innocent Until Nominated*, ed. G. Calvin Mackenzie. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

The typical Nominee for a position requiring Senate confirmation must file the following forms:

White House Personal Data Statement
White House Contact Sheet
Tax Waiver
Credit Report Release
Medical Information Release
SF86 National Security Background Check
SF86 Supplement
SF86 Immigration addendum
SF278 Financial Disclosure
A Senate Committee questionnaire

on all of the topics covered in separate forms in the executive branch as well as a series of questions (typically 12) that focus on the nominee’s responses to congressional oversight. The typical committee form covers about 70 questions.

Because we selected programming in Java®, the *NFO* software can reside on multiple platforms. Since it remembers the customized workspace it builds initially, *NFO* allows nominees several work options. For example, they can define a set of forms for one job, then redefine the forms required for a different job. Thus, nominees can file forms for additional appointments, allow others (e.g., a spouse) to share the software, or reuse it for annual updates (e.g., financial disclosure). Additionally, on the request of the Bush transition planners, we developed a capacity to transfer electronically the nominee’s responses, allowing for the infusion of the nominee’s records into the White House appointment database.

Agent of Reform

NFO had a specific service goal: aiding nominees with inquiry. Since approximately 40% of nominee inquiry involves repetitive answers, using *NFO* reduces the workload by a similar amount. Other Pew-funded transition projects, by contrast, had reform agendas at their cores. As the transition process unfolded in early 2000, however, our “framing” process helped inform the transition planners. In particular, because they had begun working so early, the Bush transition planners developed a particularly sophisticated understanding of the appointment process.

Using that information and their own management experiences, the Bush team identified two changes in nominee inquiry on which they sought our assistance. First, they wanted to know if the White House could reduce the information needed to make appropriate decisions? In effect, they had to consider the trade-off between thoroughly understanding a nominee’s liabilities and the need to adapt to the scale of presidential appointments. At one point, the Bush planners asked White House 2001 if we would assess eliminating the White House Personal Data Statement (PDS) altogether (see Sullivan 2001a). Working through the truncated transition, the Bush team implemented this trade-off in favor of speed by using, on an emergency basis, a much shorter PDS taken from the Ford administration. After its first six weeks, the Bush White House then replaced that questionnaire with a slightly longer but still more focused PDS. Both changes occurred during *NFO* programming, delaying its delivery as we accommodated the changes. Hence, *NFO* affected the transition, even if in turn the new transition slowed *NFO*’s deployment.

Second, the transition planners considered relying on responses to other questionnaires. That approach would require that the Bush White House receive the nominee’s “draft” responses to all other questionnaires before they decided to nominate. In effect, we considered whether the PDS previewed the other questionnaires. That the nominee would not file a PDS meant fewer repetitive answers but it also meant that the Bush team would have to rely on nominees finishing the other executive branch forms before making a decision. The White House never implemented the idea. Hence, *NFO* aided the transition, though it did not rationalize the inventory of inquiry.

Note

1. Now, The Century Foundation.

References

- Sullivan, Terry. 2000a. "Changing the White House Personal Data Statement." Study 9, *Reports from the White House 2001 Project, Nomination Forms Online Program*. Washington, DC: White House 2001 Project.
- Sullivan, Terry. 2000b. "A Guide to Inquiry." Study 7, *Reports from the White House 2001 Project, Nomination Forms Online Program*. Washington, DC: White House 2001 Project.
- Twentieth Century Fund. 1996. *Obstacle Course: The Report of the Twentieth Century Task Force on Presidential Appointment Process*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press.