

White House fellows form Washington counterculture

■ Partisan rancor has no footing among this group

By D. MICHAEL LINDSAY

SOMETIME in the 1990s, Washington became noticeably more partisan. Some think it inadvertently started when House Speaker Newt Gingrich effectively banned roll-call votes on Mondays and Fridays, directing Republican congressmen to their home districts every weekend to stay in touch with their constituents. Many new lawmakers followed suit, commuting weekly to Washington and leaving their families back home. As a result, many of the new members' spouses never formed friendships. Their kids never played soccer or went to school together. The small-town feeling among this elite community eroded, and the lack of ties cultivated vilification across the political aisle.

What started on Capitol Hill appears to be spilling over to the judiciary. A new study published in the *Vanderbilt Law Review* and discussed recently in *The New York Times* shows that Supreme Court clerkships, once seen as above the political fray, are now contributors to the country's polarization. Before 1990, clerks for conservative justices were about as likely to serve later in Democratic as Republican administrations, and vice versa. But among the 96 former clerks serving in the Clinton administration, only 16 percent of them came from the chambers of Justices William Rehnquist, Anthony Kennedy, Antonin Scalia or Clarence Thomas. By contrast, 68 percent of former clerks serving in the George W. Bush administration came from these four chambers.

If the Supreme Court is exacerbating the polarization in this country, one would expect the White House to be fanning the partisan flames even harder. Remarkably, the opposite is occurring. My new study on the White House Fellows Program (www.whitehousefellowsproject.org/) — which, like the court's clerkships, brings promising recruits to work in Washington for a year — reveals no significant correlation between an administration and the political leaning of its fellows. In fact, among the 103 White House fellows selected during the George W. Bush administration, 37 percent were Republican, 35 percent Democratic and 28 percent independent. Not every administration has such an even split of fellows along party lines (the Clinton years being the most skewed). But over time, the fellowship has retained its nonpartisan ideals set forth by President Lyndon B. Johnson when he established it in 1964. Commissioners of the Commission on White House Fellows, who serve at the pleasure of the president, annually select fewer than 20 fellows out of a talented pool of applicants that can number in the thousands. They do not ask applicants about political leanings, and even if applicants reveal them, in the commission's deliberations partisan considerations are taboo. As a regional panelist, I witnessed this firsthand. Even during informal conversation with other selection committee members, there is a vigilance against partisanship. Alumni of the pro-

gram include Gens. Colin Powell and Wesley Clark, Sens. Sam Brownback and Tim Wirth, Cabinet secretaries Elaine Chao and Henry Cisneros and the current or former CEOs of J.C. Penney, CNN, Tenneco, Travelocity and Levi Strauss.

Of course, just because the program eschews partisanship doesn't mean it is apolitical. Every White House entity, including the fellowship, is influenced by the political process. During the early years of each new administration, young people who share the president's party apply to the program in large numbers, hoping to work for the man they supported during the campaign. So politics influences the applicant pool even before the first cut. Still, the program appears unimpaired in the partisan morass. The Republican mayor of Dallas, Tom Leppert, was a White House fellow during the Reagan administration, but so was Mufi Hannemann, the Democratic mayor of Honolulu. Last year, President Barack Obama nominated Kurt Campbell as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, but Campbell began his tenure in government as a White House fellow, having been selected by President George H.W. Bush's commission in 1992.

During their fellowship year, fellows naturally spend time with the president and the vice president, and they talk with practically every Cabinet secretary and senior White House official, giving them a good sense of the current administration and its political priorities. But they also participate in biweekly roundtable seminars with leaders from all walks of life, and the program's director — also a political appointee — makes a concerted effort to bring in the most prominent leaders of the opposite party and to rise above Washington's partisan rancor. These efforts impressed me while I was researching the program. Just days after Colin Powell endorsed Barack Obama for the presidency in the fall of 2008, Janet Eissenstat, the fellowship's director at the time, invited Powell to dialogue with the fellows. She — like the rest of her White House colleagues — was deeply disappointed in Powell's decision, but she still welcomed him warmly, and the tone of the roundtable was candid, generous and refreshingly nonpartisan. Fellows across the political spectrum reported to me that this atmosphere is the program's norm, not the exception.

Washington has changed a great deal from the time when President Johnson would go to the Capitol for a late-night drink with Senate Republican leader Everett Dirksen. Thankfully, the White House fellowship still retains that irenic spirit. But in today's political climate, such civility is tough to maintain. Some would even argue that it's dangerous for one's political career. As the current Commission on White House Fellowships convenes this week for its semiannual meeting, the members should recommit themselves to developing a program that transcends the polarizing impulse and — residing even within the halls of power — advances a countercultural model for Washington.

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