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Yes, Play Politics in the White House
By: Edward J. Rollins

Washington – NEARLY three decades ago another presidential transition was taking place after what was defined as a realigning election. In 1980, Ronald Reagan swept into office with a new Senate majority and a gain of more than 30 seats in the House to his party's caucus.

One of the first moves Mr. Reagan made after his inauguration was to create the White House Office of Political Affairs. I am sure from George Washington forward politics has been conducted in the White House, but Mr. Reagan wanted the job out in the open and its activities open to scrutiny.

Unfortunately the office has been widely criticized during George W. Bush's presidency, especially under the leadership of Karl Rove. Henry Waxman, a California Democrat who has been the chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, demanded that it be shut down. And the distaste for the office is bipartisan: John McCain said during his campaign that he wouldn't have a political shop in his White House. (Then again, he barely had a political operation in his campaign and he wasn't elected.)

President-elect Barack Obama, however, has not said that he will eliminate the White House political office. I hope that means he plans to keep it. Every White House needs a political operation.

In January 1981, Lyn Nofziger, Mr. Reagan's longtime press secretary and political aide, and I became the first two people appointed to the White House political office. Lyn was Mr. Reagan's first campaign hire in the 1966 California governor's race and was his traveling companion for years. He knew everyone Mr. Reagan had ever met, and he knew every political promise he had ever made. The intent behind the creation of the political office was to take care of those supporters and to remember those promises.

After a year, Lyn resigned as director of the office, and I succeeded him. As the assistant to the president for political affairs, I was at the top level of the White House hierarchy and was included in all senior staff, cabinet and policy meetings.

My office was involved in all personnel and scheduling meetings. We also served as the contact point inside the White House for the Republican National Committee and the 50 state party committees, along with the Congressional and Senate campaign committees. We approved and coordinated campaign appearances and fund-raising by the president, the vice president and the cabinet.

But the most important part of the job was to keep the president informed about the ever-changing political environment. Presidents don't always make decisions based on politics, and they shouldn't. But they do need to understand the political climate. Believe it or not, most people in a White House are not from the world of politics. They are lawyers and experts on the budget and foreign policy. They are supposed to be the best and the brightest, counseling the president without regard to the political consequences.



But they should never be so naïve that they think politics doesn't matter. There are 535 other major players in our government: 100 senators and 435 House members. Every one of them is a politician and every one of their jobs is affected by politics.

When he takes office, Mr. Obama will face major challenges. A political office that lets him communicate with his supporters and mobilize them for important battles will be essential.

The Reagan revolution was a giant grass-roots movement that culminated in two electoral landslides for Mr. Reagan and a third for his vice president. It also helped pass an enormous legislative agenda.

Mr. Obama and his team are poised to do something similar. They created the greatest campaign operation in history. By placing that operation inside the White House, Mr. Obama will have a mechanism to push his legislative agenda. He has 3.6 million donors on file. Many millions of Americans contacted his campaign's Web site and said they wanted to help. You can get a lot done with those sorts of numbers.

Yes, it's way too early to compare Mr. Obama to Mr. Reagan. The president-elect has won only his first major election and the challenges ahead are great. But that's why he needs a political operation in his White House — to stay connected to the supporters who elected him.

Edward J. Rollins, who managed Ronald Reagan's 1984 presidential campaign, was the White House political director from 1981 to 1983 and from 1984 to 1985.