

Partners - Ron Klain, Bruce Reed & Jen O'Malley Dillon

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("Partners Introduction" by Hrishikesh Hirway)

Ron: I'm Ron Klain. I'm the Chief of Staff at The White House.

Bruce: I'm Bruce Reed. I'm one of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff at The White House.

Jen: I'm Jen O'Malley Dillon. I'm the other Deputy Chief of Staff at The White House

Bruce: Jen is Deputy Chief of Staff for everything (*Jen laughs*) and I'm Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy.

Jen: (*Jen laughs*) That's not, that's not really true. I mean, the policy part's true. That's accurate.

Hrishikesh: Before he became President Joe Biden's Chief of Staff, Ron Klain served as Chief of Staff to Vice President Biden. And before that, Chief of Staff to Vice President Al Gore. And before that, he was associate counsel to President Bill Clinton.

Jen O'Malley Dillon is a veteran of Presidential Elections. And before her current job at The White House, she was Joe Biden's Campaign Manager.

Bruce Reed also served as Chief of Staff to Vice President Joe Biden. And before that, he was Chief Domestic Policy Advisor in the Clinton Administration.

It's a lot of political fire power between the three of them. And when you call into The White House, it's possible to get so flustered that you forget to hit an important button.

Oh, one sec. I'm just gonna...

(Automated Voice: "Recording in progress")

Bruce: (*Ron, Jen, Bruce & Hrishikesh laugh*) Uh oh! Hrishi! You're the pro of this! What the hell?!

Hrishikesh: I got nervous. Um, okay. *(Ron, Jen, Bruce & Hrishikesh laugh)*

Here's Ron Klain.

Ron: Bruce's one of my oldest friends and professional colleagues in the world. I've known Bruce since 1986.

Bruce: Ron had left Harvard to take his third year of law school at Georgetown so he could be in Washington with his wife, Monica Medina. And I think the first time we met was when Ron and Monica had us over to their apartment for Chinese food. And Ron cooked this banquet, which was this spectacular introduction. I mean, I'm not saying he's as good a cook as he is the Chief of Staff, but massive talent. And we hit it off 'cause we had the same dream. We were young, hopeful Democrats at a time when Democrats had won The White House once since the time we were eight years old. So it was going to be left to us to figure out how to get there. Ron actually got me a job on the first Biden campaign in 1988. It was 1987. And...

Ron: Which Bruce refused to take.

Bruce: Not exactly. I desperately wanted to take the job, it was a job as Joe Biden's speechwriter, but I was working for Al Gore at the time. And I went to see if it would be okay if I took a leave to go work for the Senator upstairs. And I asked him if he was thinking about running for President. And he said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I am." And I didn't actually get the chance to work for Joe Biden until Ron asked me to take his place midway through the Obama Administration.

Ron: We worked together in the Clinton Administration. And in the Obama Administration, when I left being Vice President Biden's Chief of Staff, Bruce took over after me.

Jen: My whole career I've heard about Ron Klain. I was a little baby field organizer on the Gore campaign and as part of that you hear about the legends of Ron Klain and what it's like to be part of a national Presidential campaign and how important he was in that. And there's not *that* many people that go from governing to political, and political back to governing. And can translate those different skill sets.

I remember meeting him once at Precision, which was a firm that I was part of. And it was, like, a social event so he came after work. And I remember asking him what it was like to have three kids because everyone, if you know about Ron, you know how much he loves his family. And if you have younger kids, you want to, like, aspire to be like their family. And so I remember having a discussion where he was like, "Well, obviously it's great. I love all my kids."

And we talked about having three kids. I, at that time, had two kids. I now have three kids. So he was (*Jen laughs*) helpful in me getting to that next step. But that was the first real conversation we had in person.

Ron: Jen was kind of a legend in Democratic politics, but someone I had never worked with until the Biden campaign. She ran the campaign, I coordinated our efforts on debate prep, Bruce was with the President, well, then, the Vice-President, you know, helping him prepare every day, working in a lot of the speeches and the policy work. So we all three worked together.

And a few days after the election, we were all up in Wilmington celebrating the President's win when the President formally offered me the job: White House Chief of Staff. There was really not a lot of time for emotion about it. There was a lot to be done, and a very short period of time to do it. My mind was already racing about all the things we'd have to do. We knew we were headed into, what seemed almost certain to be, the most difficult Presidential transition in modern times. To take over at a time of unprecedented public health crisis, economic crisis, climate crisis, racism crisis. So we had these giant challenges to attack. And we talked a little bit about putting together the team that would be needed to get the administration off to a good start. And it was very clear to me that Bruce and Jen were the right people.

With Jen, she had just run the largest Presidential campaign in American history. An organization that had been built from scratch and operated at enormous scale and complexity in the middle of a pandemic. You're out there picking players for a baseball team, here's the person who's just won the most impressive game ever pitched. It was just obvious that we desperately needed her.

Jen: I just have such tremendous respect for people that work in government, but I actually never thought that would be for me. I am a lifelong campaign person. So I was quite content to, you know, finish up and spend some time with my kids, and try to figure out what was next. And everything changed when, you know, Ron calls you and says, "So, we really need you to serve." And, to be honest with you, if it wasn't Ron, and more importantly, if it wasn't the President, I'm not sure I would've been able to feel like it made sense for me. But, you know, I felt like if they felt that I could play an important role then, you know, I was ready to sign up.

Ron: One of the reasons I wanted Jen to do her job was I had worked for her on the campaign and she was an amazing boss and an amazing leader. And she's the kind of person who manages people the way I want to see people managed.

And with Bruce, Bruce and I have, like, a 30 year mind-meld about how to think about policy problems. When we hit hard policy challenges in the campaign, I

could get on the phone with Bruce and, like, in two seconds, be aligned on what we were trying to get done.

Bruce: Well I had spent the campaign traveling around the country and working on policy for a year and a half. And so I was desperately hoping I would get the chance to do that in The White House. I sat down at the President-elect's house with Ron and the President-elect and Joe Biden said, "how'd you like to do just that?"

Ron: You know, they're just very few people in America who have a reputation for being the kind of policy maven that Bruce is. It was just not a difficult choice.

Bruce: I was ecstatic. It's always an honor to work at The White House, but it's a particular thrill to be able to come back and do it again.

Ron: It was really important to me that we have people who share the values that Joe Biden had. You know, putting the mission first, the goals first, getting along well, no jerks, and, you know, like, having each other's backs. And having done this in lesser roles a bunch of other times over the past 30 years, you know, that was just really important to me. You know, not having to deal with personality conflicts, not having to deal with people feathering their nests or trying to fight for turf.

Bruce: What's most important about Ron running the place and us all, you know, having roots in the campaign, is that we know that this isn't about us.

Ron: This team developed its chemistry during the campaign under Jen's leadership, and then brought that chemistry to The White House. We come in in the morning, we have our first meeting of our smallest leadership team at 8:00 in the morning. It's Bruce Jen, myself, Steve Ricchetti, the Counselor to the President, Mike Donilon, the other Counselor to the President, Cedric Richmond, President's Senior Advisor, Kate Bedingfield, the Communications Director, Jen Psaki, the Press Secretary. And we meet in the morning, go over the most important issues, the things we're going to face in the day ahead.

Then we have a larger senior staff meeting at 8:20 and take whatever the core group has put together at eight o'clock and transmit that down through the senior team. At 9:00 each day, we have, kind of, a meeting on our legislative agenda.

And then after that, usually, we have meetings with the President then. Usually then in the afternoon, the President's doing some kind of public event, whether that's a speech in The White House or traveling to go out in the country to an event. Either Jen or Bruce, one of them at least, travels with him all the time. I stay at The White House.

Jen: Bruce and I trade off traveling with the President. And, you know, our partnership there is really trying to make sure it's seamless between the two of us. Bruce has just been such a champion for me, as someone who has young kids. Sometimes the travel's complicated and he's always taken a little extra on if it means I get a little bit of extra time with my kids. And it's a testament to Bruce, it's a testament to Ron. I think it really just kind of gets to the core essence of the personal connection we all carry to support each other.

Ron: And a lot of my job is just, kind of, making sure that I get out of their way and let them do their things, making sure they have access to the President when they need it. So I guess it's a little bit of, like, orchestra conductor and a little bit of keeping all the trains on the right tracks.

Jen: Our backgrounds are different and so I think, often what we have, is unique perspectives that we're bringing to the same problem to tackle. And the environment that Ron has created is that there is real opportunity for all of us to be on a level playing field to make our case. You know, there's oftentimes where we're not all a hundred percent in agreement on something and Ron will help all of us work together on a memo that will go to the President with the team's different recommendations.

Ron: I mean, literally every day, one of the two of them comes into my office and, you know, I'm thinking about going one way and we, we go another way. And so, it's not an uncommon experience, it's the common experience.

Bruce: And Ron does something else, which I'd never seen any Chief of Staff do, which is, constantly re-examine, and ask us to re-examine, the decisions that he's made. To take another look at our strategy without any kind of pride of authorship. And that's really important for an organization that's operating in a treacherous, changing environment.

One thing that this team does really well, and that Ron does and in particular really well, is see all the possibilities; calculate all of the possible things that could go wrong, anticipate those. And if you know where the ball might bounce then you have a little better chance of predicting what the right course might be.

Ron: Government makes a lot of decisions every day. All the easy decisions have been made someplace else. The clear-cut calls, the 99:1 calls. The, "Hey, should we build a road that is a good road, in a good place, with good people?" Those decisions are all made someplace else. The decisions that come to The White House are the 51:49 decisions or the 49:49 decisions, where there's really, there is no good answer. It's a choice between two bad options or it's a choice between two good options that are equally good. That's what makes this so hard, is that there are really no easy decisions, no easy problems that we're dealing with

here. And at a time of a highly polarized country and a highly divided Congress, no one's out there saying, "Well, let's just give him the benefit of the doubt," on anything. And I think that's why the unity of the team has been so important, the respect inside the team has been so important because it is bumpy and it is choppy.

Jen: Being in leadership is like a extremely isolating kind of role, typically, but I think the partnership that we have has allowed us to not actually feel like we're, sort of, off on our own world.

Ron: It's very different being in The Biden White House than The Clinton White House when Bruce and I first started. In The Clinton White House, you had virtually no one who had ever served in government before. We're all, kind of, rookies to doing this. But, even below the Senior most team, a lot of the mid-level staff, are veterans of the Obama-Biden Administration. And so people have a maturity and an experience that allows them to accept the fact that these are hard calls, people see them differently, it doesn't mean we're at war, it doesn't mean we don't like each other, it just means we see these things from different perspectives.

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Jen: And I think the biggest thing that I see every day at The White House *is* that partnership and the respect that we all have, the three of us. And that the stakes of what we have to accomplish is so high everyday that our job here is just to do the work.

Ron: I love the people I work with at The White House. I mean, we've only had one chance to all get together and have dinner outside of The White House. Cause it has been, it's a lot of work, and people have families and whatnot. But I really enjoy hanging out with this group of people and consider them all friends and that's really important. I come to work every day and there are a lot of bad things about it, but the people are the best thing about it.

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Hrishikesh: Ron Klain, Jen O'Malley Dillon and Bruce Reed are partners. You can follow each of them on Twitter, where they have official 46th President Twitter handles. Ron is @whcos, Jen is @jod46 and Bruce is @brucereed46.

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Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I've produced and edited this episode and I made the music. Maureen Hoban is my co-producer. And Chloe Parker and Casey Deal are the production assistants. *Partners* is a Mailchimp podcast, made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at mailchimp.com/presents and at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.