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Paperwork Piling Up on Carter

President Carter is scrambling desperately to get ahead of the paperwork being piled on his desk. Sources close to the President acknowledge that he has become too bogged down in details and deadlines to see beyond the immediate crisis.

His view of the problems on the horizon, they say, has been obstructed by the mountains of paperwork. "There has been very little long-range planning in the White House," one top presidential adviser told us. "It's all crisis management. Nothing is solved until the deadline approaches."

Carter has advanced from one crisis to another since his inaugural walk down Pennsylvania Avenue seven months ago. He hadn't finished unpacking before he was confronted with a critical shortage of natural gas. "The President should have been told in November that he'd be facing a natural gas crisis in January," complained one adviser.

The recent steel price increases also took the White House by surprise. "That could have been predicted six months ago," grumped the adviser.

Some Carter aides are now trying to anticipate the problems before they become disasters. The President's pollster, Patrick Caddell, is trying to devise statistical measures that can predict trouble.

Stuart E. Eizenstat, the domestic policy chief, also is trying to plan for the future. But his staff has been overwhelmed with immediate problems. "We've had to deal with energy, tax reform, welfare, the economic stimulus package, aliens, minimum wage, urban problems, reorganization and Social Security," Eizenstat told us. "These are critical problems that the Republican administrations just didn't deal with."

One White House adviser suggested that Carter "hire 12 of the brightest guys in the country and let them work on long-range problems." But Eizenstat, in an interview with our associate Howie Kurtz, said that he fears such aides might "sit off in a corner and lose touch with reality." He prefers to have his own staff work on complex proposals such as energy and welfare.

There is no longer an H.R. Haldeman zealously guarding the door to the Oval Office. Every aide has been encouraged to send his ideas directly to Carter. Consequently, he spends much of his time poring over stacks of memoranda, option papers and trivial problems.

"The President shouldn't be spending his time deciding who gets to use the White House pool," complained one top Carter associate. "He spends hours on stuff like that. He loves detail." After one Cabinet meeting, for instance, aides were surprised to find that Carter had read and approved the minutes of the meeting. They were initialed "OK—JC." The President has now been convinced that such duties should be relegated to a secretary.

On substantive issues, however, Carter insists on having complete background data, not just a summary. For example, he recently read nearly 100 pages of memoranda on the problem of shoring up the ailing Social Security system.

A cover memo from Eizenstat described the short-term and long-term problems, congressional expectations, the question of public confidence and a series of options. There were spaces for Carter to approve or disapprove the options. Attached were lengthy memos and charts from Treasury Secretary W. Michael Blumenthal, Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph A. Califano Jr. and budget boss Bert Lance.

Some Carter staffers argue that the only way to achieve any action in bureaucratic Washington is to set deadlines. The President, for instance, waited to get involved in the congressional wrangling over auto emission standards until two weeks before Detroit's threatened shutdown of production. This was a calculated strategy to force Congress to pass the auto pollution legislation, a top aide told us. Contingency plans were hurriedly drawn, nevertheless, to allow continued production while slapping fines on the polluting cars.

Now that most congressmen have fled the humid Capitol for the summer, Carter finally has a chance to look ahead. He has attended more than 20 budget hearings to set priorities for next year's spending. He has also asked his Cabinet for a "wish list" of legislation they want the White House to push next year.

For the first time, the President is deferring to congressional experts on many issues. "Congress is light years ahead of us in many areas," one assistant told us. "We often don't have a position until some congressman calls up and says, 'What's your position?' "