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West Wing Playbook

The power players, latest policy developments, and intriguing whispers percolating inside the West Wing.

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A-mos powerful Biden aide

By **MAX TANI** and **SAM STEIN** | 05/13/2022 05:52 PM EDT | Updated 05/13/2022 08:11 PM EDT

Welcome to POLITICO's West Wing Playbook, your guide to the people and power centers in the Biden administration. With help from Allie Bice.

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AMOS HOCHSTEIN is, perhaps, the most influential **JOE BIDEN** adviser that most people don't know about. He wants to keep it that way.

"I called him to tell him you'd called, and he said, 'I hate these stories,'" Hochstein's one-time boss, former Sen. **CHRIS DODD** (D-Conn.), said in a phone call for this piece.

It's understandable. A senior energy and security adviser at the State Department, Hochstein operates at some of the biggest policy tension points in the Biden administration. He is tasked with helping to reduce U.S. reliance on fossil fuels right when the political realities of high gas prices are setting in. He works at Foggy Bottom during a time when the administration is sending billions to Ukraine for its war against Russia and simultaneously trying to secure energy for European countries struggling to wean themselves off Russia's energy supply.

Multiple people with knowledge of the administration's internal dynamics say his role is expansive, and he's become a regular in the West Wing. The president, who is personally close to Hochstein (Axios described him last year as one of Biden's "[closest confidantes](#)") and his chief of staff, **RON KLAIN**, have increasingly leaned on him for guidance. He's also often been by the key point of contact backchanneling with European countries seeking to find alternatives to Russian gas.

In public appearances, Hochstein has voiced support for renewable energy and transitioning away from fossil fuels. Behind the scenes, he has made transitioning to renewable energy a key long-term goal of ensuring energy security.

But the longtime senate staffer, who previously advised Biden when he was vice president, also spent his time between Democratic administrations in the gas business. He worked as an executive at natural gas company Tellurian, and promoted liquified natural gas exports. He also did a stint at Naftogaz, the Ukrainian state-owned energy company at the center of disputes over the flow of Russian gas to Europe.

Rather than hamper, Hochstein's service in and knowledge of global energy markets has elevated his status within the administration. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Biden tapped him to serve as the U.S. representative on the U.S.-EU Task Force on Energy Security, and Hochstein traveled with the president on his recent high-profile trip to Europe. Hochstein has also been dispatched to the Middle East to mediate talks between Lebanon and Israel over maritime drilling in an offshore zone thought to be rich with natural gas.

Hochstein's friends, along with executives in the oil and gas business, have attributed his importance in the administration to his close relationship with Biden, his knowledge of global energy markets, and a willingness to pursue a range of policy solutions to energy issues.

"There's no doubt about the fact that he's the point person on all of these energy matters, which at the end of the day are a fundamental piece of the puzzle in terms of how we respond to Russian aggression," said **DANIEL VAJDICH**, a lobbyist who has worked as an advisor to the Ukrainian state-owned energy sector.

Hochstein also is familiar with navigating choppy political currents.

He became the focus of attention in conservative media and among Republican lawmakers over comments he made to then-vice president Biden about his son **HUNTER BIDEN**'s work in Ukraine. His comments were cited in Rep. **MARJORIE TAYLOR-GREENE**'s (R-Ga.) bill calling for the president's impeachment. Republicans, like Sen. **TED CRUZ** (R-Texas), were also not pleased by his early role in the administration as the advocate on Capitol Hill for waiving sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. (The White House said at the time it did not support Nord Stream 2, but felt that the sanctions against Russia over the pipeline would alienate Germany.)

But his greatest detractors at the moment come from the opposite end of the political spectrum. Hochstein has become an avatar for environmental groups' frustrations with the Biden administration. Some groups fear that the political pressures over gas prices is causing him to waiver on adopting aggressive anti-carbon policies.

On Thursday, Friends of the Earth announced it had filed a Freedom of Information Act request for all of Hochstein's emails with the U.S.-EU energy task force as well as communications between Hochstein and State Department ethics officials.

In a phone call with West Wing Playbook, Friends of the Earth program manager **LUKAS ROSS** said Hochstein's ascension within the administration and the departure of some climate-friendly personnel, like White House Council on Environmental Quality staffers **CECILIA MARTINEZ** and **DAVID KIEVE**, have put environmental advocates on high alert.

The group said it wants to see Hochstein's correspondence with many of his previous colleagues in the liquefied natural gas industry to better understand the Biden administration's ties to the fossil fuel industry. Ross said the organization isn't afraid to sue to get what it wants.

"If the State Department drags its feet, our lawyers are sharpening their knives," he said.

An administration official said the organization could better spend its time trying "to push forward the climate agenda rather than file FOIAs, through which they will find nothing."

TEXT US — ARE YOU JEN PSAKI? We want to hear from you on your final day. Or if you think we missed something in today's edition, let us know and we may include it tomorrow. Email us at westwingtips@politico.com.

POTUS PUZZLER

This one is courtesy of reader **ALEX PENA** — who was the youngest first lady?

(Answer at the bottom.)

CARTOON OF THE WEEK

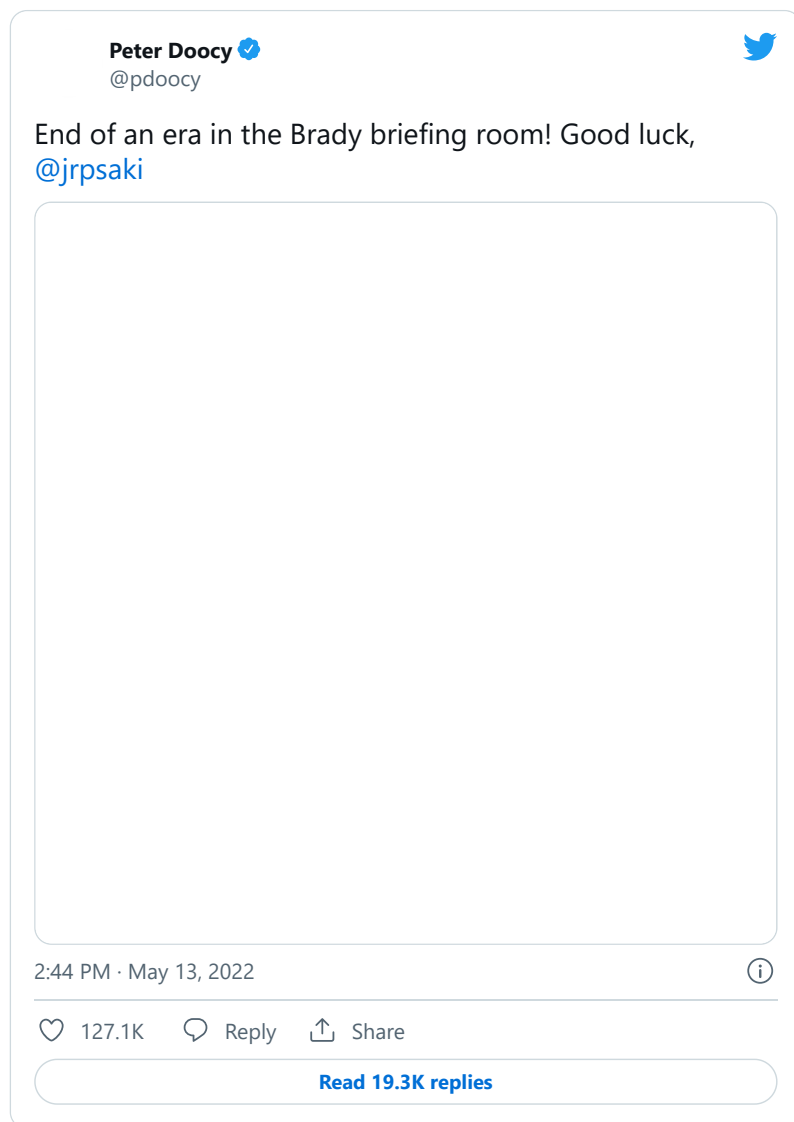
It's Friday, which means its cartoon feature time! This one is courtesy of **DICK WRIGHT**. Our very own **MATT WUERKER** also publishes a selection of cartoons from all over the country. [View the cartoon carousel here.](#)

THE OVAL

PSAKI'S SIGN OFF: Outgoing White House press secretary **JEN PSAKI** had her last day on the job Friday, [and thanked reporters in her final press briefing](#): "I want to thank all of you in this room, you have challenged me, you have pushed me, you

have debated me, and at times we have disagreed — that is democracy in action.” As CNN’s **BRIAN STELTER** noted, it was her 224th briefing.

Psaki’s husband was spotted in the briefing room, taking in the moment. And, for a send off, Fox News’ **PETER DOOCY**, Psaki’s most notable sparring partner, posted a pic of the two of them on Twitter — his first tweet since August 2020.



ROLL THOSE DICE: Our own **ADAM CANCRYN** reports on the growing doom and panic inside the White House over the increasing likelihood that congressional Republicans will log-jam the passage of additional Covid relief funds. Among the notable tidbits:

1. The current push is for \$10 billion in funding but \$5 billion of that would have to go to Pfizer immediately to cover the costs of its antiviral treatment from earlier this year.
2. The penny pinching could get so tight that the administration is contemplating limiting access to its next generation of vaccines to only the highest-risk recipients.

It’s the type of rationing of vaccines we haven’t had since the very early days of the pandemic.

THERE IS A DELETE BUTTON, FOLKS: The [White House has a tweet up](#), still, from yesterday in which it claims that “when President Biden took office, millions were unemployed and there was no vaccine available.”

This is demonstrably untrue. How can one be sure, you ask? Well, here's Joe Biden getting his first vaccine shot a MONTH before he took office.

WHAT THE WHITE HOUSE WANTS YOU TO READ: National Economic Council Deputy Director **BHARAT RAMAMURTI** tweeted out this NYT piece on the Great Resignation, and how it wasn't quite a resignation after all: "What workers realized, though, is that they could find better ways to earn a living. Higher pay. Stable hours. Flexibility. They expected more from their employers, and appeared to be getting it."

WHAT THE WHITE HOUSE DOESN'T WANT YOU TO READ: Billionaire **ELON MUSK** calling out the president by name Thursday on Twitter, writing that Biden's "mistake is that he thinks he was elected to transform the country, but actually everyone just wanted less drama."

WELCOME TO THE CLUB: Biden held a secure call this morning with Prime Minister **MAGDALENA ANDERSSON** of Sweden and President **SAULI NIINISTÖ** of Finland. Both nations are expected to seek joining NATO in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

DON'T MISS CONGRESS MINUTES: Need to follow the action on Capitol Hill blow-by-blow? Check out Minutes, POLITICO's new platform that delivers the latest exclusives, twists and much more in real time. Get it on your desktop or download the POLITICO mobile app for iOS or Android. CHECK OUT CONGRESS MINUTES HERE.

AGENDA SETTING

TO GRANDSTAND OR NOT TO GRANDSTAND: With inflation blotting out almost every other issue for the Biden presidency, Democratic strategist **HARI SEVUGAN** offered up an idea for the White House: Go hard at corporations for profiteering during these tough times.

"A failure to use the bully pulpit every day in every way to go after price gouging is political malpractice," Sevugan wrote.

We here at West Wing Playbook have previously asked the question as to why Biden doesn't do this more (he does it some, but not consistently). And one of the answers we got back was that progressive-minded economists would call bullsh*t on him.

Sure enough, the so-called inflation "hack gap" reared its head Thursday evening, when the oft-quoted **JASON FURMAN**, who chaired **BARACK OBAMA**'s Council of Economic Advisers, chimed in on Twitter. He shared a column from WaPo's CATHERINE RAMPELL, in which she argued that it was a "Greedflation" conspiracy theory to insist that corporate profits were anything but a product of limited supply and excessive demand.

"Appreciate how consistently and effectively @crampell calls out this dangerous misguided nonsense," Furman wrote.

THINGS THAT MAKE YOU GO, HMMMM: We noticed a tweet in the wee hours of Thursday morning from Biden's longtime pollster **JOHN ANZALONE** that circulated a clip from "Real Time with **BILL MAHER**." In the clip, longtime Democratic strategist **PAUL BEGALA** absolutely goes off on his party's leadership for contemplating the idea of large-scale student loan cancellation, saying it would alienate "factory floor" workers and reinforce the image of the Democrats as the "party of the faculty lounge." This was not one of those RTs-don't-mean-endorsement type tweets, either. Anzalone, who helps craft messaging for Biden world, added a bit of commentary: "Sometimes we should just really listen to @PaulBegala more."

Anzalone didn't return our request for comment.

SPEAKING OF STUDENT LOAN FORGIVENESS: Our own **MICHAEL STRATFORD** has a piece up today that explores the state of play inside the administration. And, well, it's murky.

“President Joe Biden’s advisers are looking at ways to limit student loan forgiveness based on borrowers’ income to avoid sending benefits to higher-earning Americans,” Michael writes. “But that approach is already angering progressives and could be a nightmare to implement before the November elections.”

[Read more here.](#)

THE BUREAUCRATS

FIRST IN WEST WING PLAYBOOK: LINDA ETIM, the National Security Council’s senior director for development, global health, and humanitarian response, and a special assistant to the president, is leaving the White House, two people familiar with the matter told **DANIEL LIPPMAN**. She worked on the transition and was a day one employee helping her NSC directorate get up and running. Etim will be departing later this summer.

ANOTHER FIRST: BRANDON THOMPSON, Presidential Personnel Office’s senior associate director for economic agency personnel, is moving over to the VP’s office to be deputy director of public engagement and intergovernmental affairs, Lippman has also learned. He is a Biden and Harris campaign veteran and his last day is today.

WHAT WE'RE READING

[Opinion: This could be a game changer in the November elections](#) (CNN’s Gina Glantz)

[Senate Dems grab one last chance to push Biden on student debt](#) (POLITICO’s Burgess Everett)

WHERE'S JOE

He received the President’s Daily Brief in the morning. He also welcomed Jordan **KING ABDULLAH II** and **CROWN PRINCE HUSSEIN** to the White House.

In the afternoon, the president met with local elected officials, chiefs of police and a community violence intervention expert from cities across America to discuss how the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package is being used to reform infrastructure and policing. (AP’s **JOSH BOAK** and **DARLENE SUPERVILLE** have more details.)

He also delivered remarks on the American Rescue Plan in the Rose Garden.

He participated in the U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit in the evening. He was then scheduled to depart for New Castle, Del., where he will spend the weekend.

WHERE'S KAMALA

She hosted a working lunch with ASEAN leaders. Following the lunch, she held a meeting with ASEAN leaders, Cabinet members and other administration officials at the U.S. Department of State.

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THE OPPO BOOK

When **DAN KOH**, the Department of Labor’s chief of staff, got married back in 2016, he used his wedding hashtag to further speculation about running for office.

At the time, he was working for then-Boston mayor, now Labor secretary, **MARTY WALSH**, and a standout player in the office, leaving some to wonder about Koh’s own political ambitions. So naturally, when Koh got married to his wife, **AMY SENNETT**, they used the hashtag #KohforSennett2016.

“People who want to criticize, they have every right to,” Koh told The Boston Globe in December 2016. “At the end of the day, it was my wedding. I owed it to my family and my wife to be excited about it.”

POTUS PUZZLER ANSWER

FRANCES CLEVELAND at 21 years of age. She married **GROVER CLEVELAND** on June 2, 1886, when he was 49 and she was 21.

A CALL OUT — Thanks to Alex for this question! Think you have a more difficult one? Send us your best question on the presidents with a citation and we may feature it.

Edited by Eun Kyung Kim and Sam Stein

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