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Ray's aides: Little-known wielders of power

REGISTER PHOTO BY BOB MODERSOHN



Gov. Robert Ray is surrounded by his staff. From left are Doug Gross, Nicola Schissel, Ron Mosher, Russ Cross, Susan Mitschke, Bill Crews, John

McCarroll, Nancy Shimanek, Ed Stanek, David Oman, Brice Oakley and Ken Quinn. Not pictured is George Wilson.

By DAVID YEPSEN

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Every morning when Dennis J. Nagel takes his morning jog along the quiet streets of Iowa City, he admires the roadsides that are free of discarded bottles and cans.

It is a small but pleasing reminder to him of the work he did a few years ago as a top aide to Gov. Robert Ray. Nagel was key to securing passage of the so-called bottle bill, that simple statute that taps you for a nickel deposit every time you buy a soft drink or beer in the state.

Today Nagel is a law student at the University of Iowa, but only a few months ago he was part of Ray's small, crack team of young, hard-working personal staffers.

The bottle bill is a good example of how these little-known people in Ray's inner-circle move the levers of power for Iowa's governor, making daily decisions that have impact on Iowans.

In recent weeks Ray has completed the formation of a new staff. None of his top aides today were with him when he took office in 1969. Many of the newcomers say Ray plans to use this new blood to keep from growing stale in the top job.

"I was in grade school when he became governor," said Douglas Gross, 26, who took Nagel's place on the staff as the aide who pushes Ray's program in the Legislature.

Ray aides are important because they draft legislation, write speeches, design his travel schedule, and help him hire and fire people.

"They almost serve a cabinet function," Ray said.

A primary mission of an aide, some would say, is to make the boss look good and to take the rap if necessary. "I always said the deficits were mine and the surpluses were his," said former state Comptroller Marvin Selden.

In the past Ray's staff has contributed to his political successes, and it promises to continue to do that. For example, the quality of Ray's staff operation has freed him to travel around the nation and around the world on trade and political missions. While Ray is criticized by some for the trips, he says he can safely be away because he stays in contact with his staff by telephone.

Ray's travels illustrate the trust the governor places on his staff: No politician would risk his or her political neck by traveling around without leaving reliable people back home to mind the store.

The Ray staff is almost a mirror image of the boss himself. Statehouse wags call them clones of Ray. They frequently are a colorless lot. They manage more than they lead. They dress traditionally, wear little flag pins on their clothing, and otherwise try to do nothing to embarrass the boss.

To ease tensions at the office, they play pingpong with Ray at the Capitol. Ray usually wins, and the aides deny they let him. Their idea of a good time after a softball game is stop at a Poppin Fresh Pie Shop.

"This new staff is the best he's ever had," said Richard Gilbert, a former press secretary to Ray and now a Des Moines broadcasting executive.

Here is a peek at Ray's "cabinet":

• David Oman, 28, a Cedar Falls native who joined Ray's staff at 22, became press secretary at 23, and now serves as Ray's top aide or chief of staff. He handles Ray's most sensitive political deals. He is the jack-of-all-trades, ranging from hatchet man to the guy who helps old ladies with their chairs at the dinners Ray gives for the elderly at Christmas.

• Douglas Gross, the Ray lobbyist. A former campaign worker for Ray, Gross worked for U.S. Representative Tom Tauke (Rep., Ia.) in Washington, where he developed energy issues for Tauke. Gross then came to the Energy Policy Council before joining Ray's staff.

• George "Pic" Wilson, 34, a staffer who worked for 10 years at the Iowa Department of Transportation and later as a financial analyst for the Legislature. He was the expert on education financing.

"I don't know whether he's a Republican or Democrat or independent," Oman said. "We didn't ask him about that when he came on board."

• Nancy J. Shimanek, 34, a former member of the Iowa House of Representatives. She served for five years, including a stint as chairwoman of the influential Judiciary Committee. Shimanek keeps tabs on the state's largest bureaucracy, the Department of Social Services.

• John P. McCarroll, 30, who serves as Ray's press secretary. While he has no previous political experience, McCarroll relies on his background as a reporter for the Cedar Rapids Gazette and KRNT Radio in Des Moines to manage the statehouse press corps for Ray.

• Russell Cross, 26, an accountant who prepares Ray's travel schedule and effectively decides how the governor of Iowa spends much of his time.

• Susan Mitschke, 38, the governor's confidential secretary. She handles some of the most sensitive correspondence for Ray.

• Kenneth M. Quinn, 39, a Dubuque native who is on leave to Ray from the U.S. Foreign Service. Quinn is helping Ray clean up the troubled Iowa National Guard and Iowa's prison system. His most rewarding work was spearheading the Ray-backed Iowa SHARES program that provided relief aid to starving Cambodians.

• Nicola Schissel, 36, who serves as the staff appointments secretary. An Iowa governor makes more than 1,000 appointments to boards and commissions, and Schissel uses a computer to manage those appointments for Ray.

She "has a lot of power," said Quinn, who added: "A good word from her can mean an awful lot" to someone seeking an appointment.

• Brice Oakley, 44, a lawyer who rides herd on the rules and regulations of state agencies. In addition to making sure the bureaucrats' policies also are Ray's, Oakley is the governor's legal adviser. An unsuccessful candidate for lieutenant governor in 1978, Oakley was given an appointive job with as much, if not more, power than the lieutenant governor.

• Ronald F. Mosher, 38, the state comptroller. While not part of the immediate staff, Mosher is part of the inner circle of advisers. A Fort Dodge native, Mosher was working as the comptroller in Delaware when Ray persuaded him to come home. Ray relies heavily on Mosher's financial and economic recommendations to formulate the state's \$1.8 billion general fund budget.

• Edward Stanek, 34, the head of an agency called the Office for Planning and Programming, where Stanek, who once served as director of the state Energy Policy Council, is monitoring the changes being made by the Reagan administration in Washington. Ray established Stanek as a troubleshooter who is to help state government cope with some of the biggest changes in the federal government since the 1930s.

• Bill Crews, 29, a former Ray campaign worker who specializes in water and soil conservation issues.

The aides' salaries range from \$27,000 to \$47,000 a year.

Also crucial to Ray's operation are about a dozen secretaries and three Iowa State Patrol troopers who are part of Ray's security detail.

It's not a particularly large staff, according to Ray, who said most states of comparable size have larger staffs for their governors. But Ray said he likes a "lean and trim" staff because it saves tax dollars and enables him to keep a close personal contact with each aide.

Staff meetings "have open, hard debates," according to Ray. He insists that aides be "truthful and honest" with him and "open with the public" about their work.

Ray also said he insists that his aides be courteous with citizens and prompt in replying to letters. The deluge of mail pains most of the aides, but Oman said it's a necessary part of serving Iowans.

"It may seem routine to us, but the average Iowan doesn't bring an average problem to the governor," Oman said.

All of the aides described Ray as a hard worker who puts in long hours and expects the staff to do likewise. They describe him as a thoughtful man who is usually cool under

pressure. "But I've heard rumors there's a temper under all that," Gross said, smiling.

Asked what all that does to his personal life, Oman replied: "What personal life?"

Two former aides saw their work for Ray contribute to the breakup of their marriages. Oman said that troubles Ray, and the governor tries to have the aides and their families over for small dinners and parties at the governor's mansion, Terrace Hill, in an effort to keep spouses happy.

One former aide, Susan Mickelsen,

sometimes complained that the job kept her from sleeping well at night, and another former aide, William Jackson, said the job "meant I didn't see my kids very often."

Ray's aides have strong personal loyalties to Ray. "He has to know that what is said around here stays in here," Quinn said.

But the aides can get mean, if necessary.

Once Oman lied to a reporter about the contents of a Ray speech that was to be given the next day.

On the day of the speech the furious

scribe demanded to know why Oman had fibbed.

"If I'd said there was something else you'd have wanted to know what it was. If I said 'No comment' you'd have known there was something else. It was either have a bunch of legislators mad at me or have you mad at me. I guess I have you mad at me. Want to go have a drink?"

And most of the aides admit it isn't all a selfless calling that drives them. It's also a little plain ambition and ego trip. Aides get the best parking spaces at the Capitol, and said former aide Gilbert: "I don't know of anyone who's left that staff for a lesser job."