



*Cabinet Secretary Christine Varney with President Bill Clinton*



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# Cabinetmaker

*The job of coordinating the president's communications with his top advisers falls to Christine Varney*

*By Susan Feeney*

**I**t's just before 8 a.m. on a Friday when Christine Varney pulls up to the southeast gate of the White House. She pauses long enough for the uniformed Secret

*Service agent to check her identification, peek inside her 1987 Audi, and inspect the trunk.*





In an instant, Varney pulls into her reserved space across from the ground floor entrance to the West Wing and heads directly for the daily White House staff meeting in the historic Roosevelt Room, across the hall from the Oval Office. There, portraits of Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt look down upon a long polished wood conference table. When the Clinton administration moved in, there was an addition to the decor: a bust of former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a favorite of current First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and many of the women who work in the White House, Varney included.

The 1978 recipient of a master's degree in public administration from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Varney is cabinet secretary for President Bill Clinton. As point person for communications between the president and his 20-member cabinet, Varney, along with Chief of Staff Thomas "Mack" McLarty, acts as Clinton's primary gatekeep-

er, helping determine who he sees, what he does, and when he does it.

Cabinet secretaries who want to speak to the president may call McLarty or Varney, or call Clinton directly. But when the secretaries don't go through Varney, the president's office staff usually calls her anyway to ask her advice. Is it a call the president must return? What's the subject matter?

Varney works closest with Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros, Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, and Health and Human Services Secretary—and Maxwell School graduate—Donna Shalala.

Varney says the cabinet members "all like me. On a bad day, they might not." She shrugs. "I have to be the bad cop sometimes, and be the bearer of bad news."

Cisneros, the former mayor of San Antonio, is among the cabinet secretaries who sings Varney's praises.

"As mayor, I found out that it was very useful to have someone at the

center of the storm while everything else was blowing around and moving, one person you could get to and get an answer from," he says. "Christine is that person if you're a cabinet officer. If I need to place one call to the White House on almost any subject, it would be to Christine."

Varney's days are filled with telephone calls, trouble shooting, and the daily morning meeting with the White House staff. Varney begins today's meeting by announcing the particulars of three upcoming White House events that involve cabinet members: a global warming announcement set for the Rose Garden, a ceremony honoring top-flight schools from around the country, and NAFTA Products Day, when American companies will display their potential wares for export under the North American Free Trade Agreement. Varney also pitches possible dates for the president and cabinet officials to present the Malcolm Baldrige awards honoring excellence in business.

The meeting includes a review of Clinton's schedule for the day. This morning he'll hold meetings with aides on Somalia and Haiti and receive the Prime Minister of Turkey. This afternoon, there are briefings on health-care reforms and NAFTA.

There is grumbling about a news story officials say is incorrect. A strategy is hatched to counter it. Varney is also asked to urge Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen to give a speech on the economy, since several economic indicators are up.

By the time the meeting breaks up at 8:45 a.m., four members of Varney's staff are 15 minutes into the office's daily telephone conference call with all agency chiefs of staff. They huddle around the speaker phone in Varney's small, windowless White House office.

White House visitors are often surprised by the West Wing's narrow corridors and small office quarters, even

PHOTO BY WALTER P. CALAHAN



Varney begins each day with a White House staff meeting in the Roosevelt Room. The meeting includes announcements of upcoming events and a review of Clinton's schedule for the day.





for some ranking officials. But it's not size that rates here, it's proximity. Anyone who wants an office big enough to bowl in can move across the driveway to the Old Executive Office Building. Few do.

Varney's office, a short walk upstairs from the Oval Office, is decorated with a framed inaugural poster, her official job proclamation signed by Clinton, and a sketch of the Maxwell School given to her when she addressed graduates last spring. On the bulletin board, beneath the Democratic National Committee map of the national media markets, are colorful works created by Varney's children, John, 6, and Michael, 3.

During the conference call, Varney tells agency officials to buckle their seat belts. The kickoff for health care legislation and the congressional vote on NAFTA, both administration priorities, are looming.

When the call ends, Varney's four aides rattle off what's on tap at the various agencies, pointing out noteworthy events and programs or potential problems. Treasury is at odds with other government agencies over the Superfund cleanup policy. A problem is brewing over ethanol programs.

A hot line, set up to take telephone calls from Americans with comments or concerns about the Clinton health care plan, is producing the kind of personal anecdotes that could help sell the program to Congress. Unfortunately, there's little funding to publicize the number. Varney directs an aide to ask the Treasury Department for the needed money.

For an upcoming East Room event, the Clintons and a cabinet secretary are set to appear. But the First Lady's office insists the program be shortened. Only the Clintons will speak.

No, says Varney. "Tell the First Lady's office no. The secretary must also speak." (A week later, the secretary spoke at the event.)

Varney asks her staff for their weekly agency reports. Each Friday she

## *SU in DC*

*Christine Varney is just one of eight Syracuse University graduates who hold presidential appointments in the Clinton Administration. The others:*

\* Donna Shalala, who received a doctoral degree in social science from the Maxwell School in 1970, is Clinton's secretary of Health and Human Services.

\* Walter Broadnax, who received a doctoral degree in public administration from the Maxwell School in 1975, works with Shalala as deputy secretary of Health and Human Services.

\* Oliver Quinn, who earned a bachelor's degree in political science from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1972, is deputy solicitor for the Department of Labor and the second-ranking attorney under Secretary of Labor Robert Reich.

\* Raymond Pierce, who received a bachelor's degree in English from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1980, is

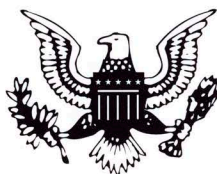
deputy assistant secretary of civil rights in the Department of Education.

\* Roslyn Mazer, who earned a bachelor's degree in political science from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1971, is deputy assistant attorney general for the Office of Policy Development in the Justice Department.

\* Charles Baquet III, who earned his master's degree in public administration from the Maxwell School in 1975, is deputy director of the Peace Corps.

\* Anthony Carnevale, who earned master's and doctoral degrees in public administration from the Maxwell School in 1974 and 1977, respectively, heads the National Commission for Employment Policy. ■





PHOTOS BY WALTER P. CALANAN



Varney's multifaceted job often includes meetings with visiting foreign dignitaries. Here she meets with prominent African women in the Roosevelt Room of the White House.

compiles and refines their dispatches into a report for the president on the activities of all government agencies. Varney's staff meeting lasts until she is due back in the Roosevelt Room at 9:45 a.m. There, 23 prominent African women wait, headphones on, ready for the translation.

During her introductory remarks, Varney opens the heavy wooden door behind her, revealing the unoccupied, gold-draped Oval Office across the hall. The women sit stunned for a moment, then spring to the door for a closer look.

After they're seated, Varney, 38, sketches the career path that brought her to the White House.

Born in Washington, D.C., she grew up in Syracuse and earned her undergraduate degree at the State University of New York at Albany. After earning a master's degree from SU, she worked for several social service agencies before receiving a degree from the Georgetown University Law Center. She worked as a Washington, D.C., lawyer and was named chief in-house counsel for the Democratic National Committee in 1988. She did this while practicing at the blue-chip

Washington law firm of Hogan and Hartson.

Varney became Clinton's campaign counsel in early 1992 and, after only one conversation with Clinton, joined

the administration from the start. Soon after winning the election, the president-elect telephoned Varney on a legal affairs issue. After getting his answer, Clinton asked Varney about her job plans.

"I'll do anything you'd like me to do," she said, "including staying at my law firm."

"All right," Clinton responded, "what do you want to do?"

"I wouldn't mind being the general counsel for the Department of Health and Human Services or the cabinet secretary," she replied.

Meanwhile, other administration officials pressed her to join the White House general counsel's office. She spoke with transition officials, making her pitch for the cabinet secretary post, which pays \$100,000 a year. A Clinton aide eventually called to summon her to a Little Rock news conference announcing staff appointments.

"What are you going to announce me as?" Varney asked.

"We don't know," came the reply. "Come on down."



Unlike many of her colleagues, Varney turns down most social invitations to spend time with her sons, Michael and John. "I draw the line between work and after-work events," she says.





In Little Rock, while on her way to a pre-announcement staff meeting, Clinton aide Harold Ikes told her she was getting her first choice of jobs.

In a White House peopled with late-night workaholics, Varney goes home to her family most evenings, rarely accepting the social invitations that inundate White House officials. "I draw the line between work and after-work events," says Varney, who takes great pains to balance the demands of a fast-track career and a young, active family.

"When it comes to combining motherhood and a high-powered career," says Alexis Herman, an assistant to the president, "Christine is our role model."

She's also a source of parenting advice for the small regiment of first-time parents who work for the administration.

Paul Begala, one of Clinton's chief political consultants, was expecting his first child during the presidential campaign. "Half the time I'd call Christine for legal advice," he says, "and half the time it would be about parenting."

Varney's official White House duties include coordinating the monthly cabinet meetings. She meets with Clinton for about 30 minutes beforehand. "I make sure the president is briefed on what's happening in the agencies," she says.

Varney begins the meetings by introducing Clinton.

"I go in and say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, the president is ready.' If I don't do it, and he walks in the room and they're all standing, he works the room and it takes a really long time to get started," she says.

During cabinet meetings, she sits just behind Clinton. He passes her notes with questions or requests for information. She passes notes back.

"I always pass one up saying, 'You're way over time, you may want to wrap up,'" she says, noting that Clinton is perpetually behind schedule.

On this day, there's no cabinet



Power lunch? Varney concludes another busy morning by joining economic adviser Robert Rubin for lunch at the Hay Adams Hotel across Lafayette Park.

meeting. Still, Varney's afternoon includes:

- Lunch with presidential economic adviser Robert Rubin and a top Fortune 500 executive at the Hay Adams Hotel across Lafayette Park from the White House.

- A brief chat with a Florida political contributor and friend of the president.

- A meeting with Clinton and others on "unfunded mandates," the requirements the federal government puts on cities and states without paying for them.

- A session with Vice President Al Gore and others on implementing a National Performance Review.

- A meeting with Bruce Babbitt and others on United States territorial issues.

Also, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant, the serviceman captured in Somalia, will arrive at nearby Andrews Air Force base the next day. It falls to Varney to coordinate which cabinet members will greet him.

All this must be done by 5:30 p.m. Then there's the president's weekly

report, which stands between Varney and two separate parent gatherings at her sons' schools. Husband Tom Graham, a software marketing executive, arranges the boys' weekly pizza dinner and attends the first parent meeting without Varney. She eventually makes it, arriving 15 minutes before it ends.

"We made it to the second one fine," says Varney.

Despite loving her job—"I wouldn't change a thing about it. It's perfect"—this isn't necessarily a life or pace Varney can see herself maintaining for eight years, providing Clinton is re-elected.

Says Varney, "We'll see if I get through next week." ■

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