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# White House Unbuttons Formal Dress Code

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

WASHINGTON — The capital flew into a bit of a tizzy when, on his first full day in the White House, [President Obama](#) was photographed in the Oval Office without his suit jacket. There was, however, a logical explanation: Mr. Obama, who hates the cold, had cranked up the thermostat.

“He’s from Hawaii, O.K.?” said Mr. Obama’s senior adviser, [David Axelrod](#), who occupies the small but strategically located office next door to his boss. “He likes it warm. You could grow orchids in there.”

Thus did an ironclad rule of the [George W. Bush administration](#) — coat and tie in the Oval Office at all times — fall by the wayside, only the first of many signs that a more informal culture is growing up in the White House under new management. Mr. Obama promised to bring change to Washington and he has — not just in substance, but in presidential style.

Although his presidency is barely a week old, some of Mr. Obama’s work habits are already becoming clear. He shows up at the Oval Office shortly before 9 in the morning, roughly two hours later than his early-to-bed, early-to-rise predecessor. Mr. Obama likes to have his workout — weights and cardio — first thing in the morning, at 6:45. (Mr. Bush slipped away to exercise midday.)

He reads several papers, eats breakfast with his family and helps pack his daughters, [Malia](#), 10, and [Sasha](#), 7, off to school before making the 30-second commute downstairs — a definite perk for a man trying to balance work and family life. He eats dinner with his family, then often returns to work; aides have seen him in the Oval Office as late as 10 p.m., reading briefing papers for the next day.

“Even as he is sober about these challenges, I have never seen him happier,” Mr. Axelrod said. “The chance to be under the same roof with his kids, essentially to live over the store, to be able to see them whenever he wants, to wake up with them, have breakfast and dinner with them — that has made him a very happy man.”

In the West Wing, Mr. Obama is a bit of a wanderer. When Mr. Bush wanted to see a member of his staff, the aide was summoned to the Oval Office. But Mr. Obama tends to roam the halls; one day last week, he turned up in the office of his press secretary, [Robert Gibbs](#), who was in the unfortunate position of having his feet up on the desk when the boss walked in.

“Wow, Gibbs,” the press secretary recalls the president saying. “Just got here and you already have your feet up.” Mr. Gibbs scrambled to stand up, surprising Mr. Obama, who is not yet accustomed to having people rise when he enters a room.

Under Mr. Bush, punctuality was a virtue. Meetings started early — the former president once locked Secretary of State [Colin L. Powell](#) out of the Cabinet Room when Mr. Powell showed up a few minutes late — and ended on time. In the Obama White House, meetings start on time and often finish late.

When the president invited Congressional leaders to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue last week to talk about his economic [stimulus package](#), the session ran so long that Mr. Obama wound up apologizing to the lawmakers — even as he kept them talking, engaging them in the details of the legislation far more than was customary for Mr. Bush.

“He was concerned that he was keeping us,” said Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia, the Republican whip. “He said, ‘I know we need to get you all out of here at a certain time.’ But we continued the discussion. What are you going to say? It’s

the president.”

If Mr. Obama’s clock is looser than Mr. Bush’s, so too are his sartorial standards. Over the weekend, Mr. Obama’s first in office, his aides did not quite know how to dress. Some showed up in the West Wing in jeans (another no-no under Mr. Bush), some in coats and ties.

So the president issued an informal edict for “business casual” on weekends — and set his own example. He showed up Saturday for a briefing with his chief economic adviser, [Lawrence H. Summers](#), dressed in slacks and a gray sweater over a white buttoned-down shirt. Workers from the Bush White House are shocked.

“I’ll never forget going to work on a Saturday morning, getting called down to the Oval Office because there was something he was mad about,” said Dan Bartlett, who was counselor to Mr. Bush. “I had on khakis and a buttoned-down shirt, and I had to stand by the door and get chewed out for about 15 minutes. He wouldn’t even let me cross the threshold.”

Mr. Obama has also brought a more relaxed sensibility to his public appearances. David Gergen, an adviser to both Republican and Democratic presidents, said Mr. Obama seemed to exude an “Aloha Zen,” a kind of comfortable calm that, Mr. Gergen said, reflects a man who “seems easy going, not so full of himself.”

At the Capitol on Tuesday, Mr. Obama startled lawmakers by walking up to the microphones in a Senate corridor to talk to reporters, as if he were still a senator. Twice, during formal White House ceremonies, Mr. Obama called out to aides as television cameras rolled, as he did on Monday when the director of the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), [Lisa P. Jackson](#), asked for a presidential pen.

“Hey, Lisa,” Mr. Obama called out to his staff secretary, Lisa Brown, “does she get this pen?”

Like Mr. Bush and other presidents before him, Mr. Obama typically begins his work day with a top-secret intelligence briefing on security threats against the United States. Mr. Bush received the “president’s daily brief” Monday through Saturday; Mr. Obama gets the briefing on Sunday as well.

But sometimes Mr. Obama’s economic briefing, a new addition to the presidential schedule, comes first. Its attendees vary depending on the day, aides said. On Tuesday, the newly sworn-in Treasury secretary, [Timothy F. Geithner](#), joined Mr. Summers to talk about financial and credit markets. On Wednesday, [Paul A. Volcker](#), the former chairman of the Federal Reserve and informal Obama adviser, was on hand to discuss regulatory reform.

Mr. Obama has also maintained the longstanding presidential tradition of weekly lunches with his vice president. For Mr. Obama, lunch generally means a cheeseburger, chicken or fish in his small dining room off the Oval Office. There is also a new addition to White House cuisine: the refrigerators are stocked with the president’s favorite organic brew: Honest Tea, in Mr. Obama’s preferred flavors of Black Forest Berry and Green Dragon.

If there is one thing Mr. Obama has not gotten around to changing, it is the Oval Office décor.

When Mr. Bush moved in, he exercised his presidential decorating prerogatives and asked his wife, Laura, to supervise the design of a new rug. Mr. Bush loved to regale visitors with the story of the rug, whose sunburst design, he liked to say, was intended to evoke a feeling of optimism.

The rug is still there, as are the presidential portraits Mr. Bush selected — one of Washington, one of Lincoln — and a collection of decorative green and white plates. During a meeting last week with retired military officials, before he signed an executive order shutting down the prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, Mr. Obama surveyed his new environs with a critical eye.

“He looked around,” said one of his guests, retired Rear Adm. John D. Hutson, “and said, ‘I’ve got to do something about these plates. I’m not really a plates kind of guy.’ ”

