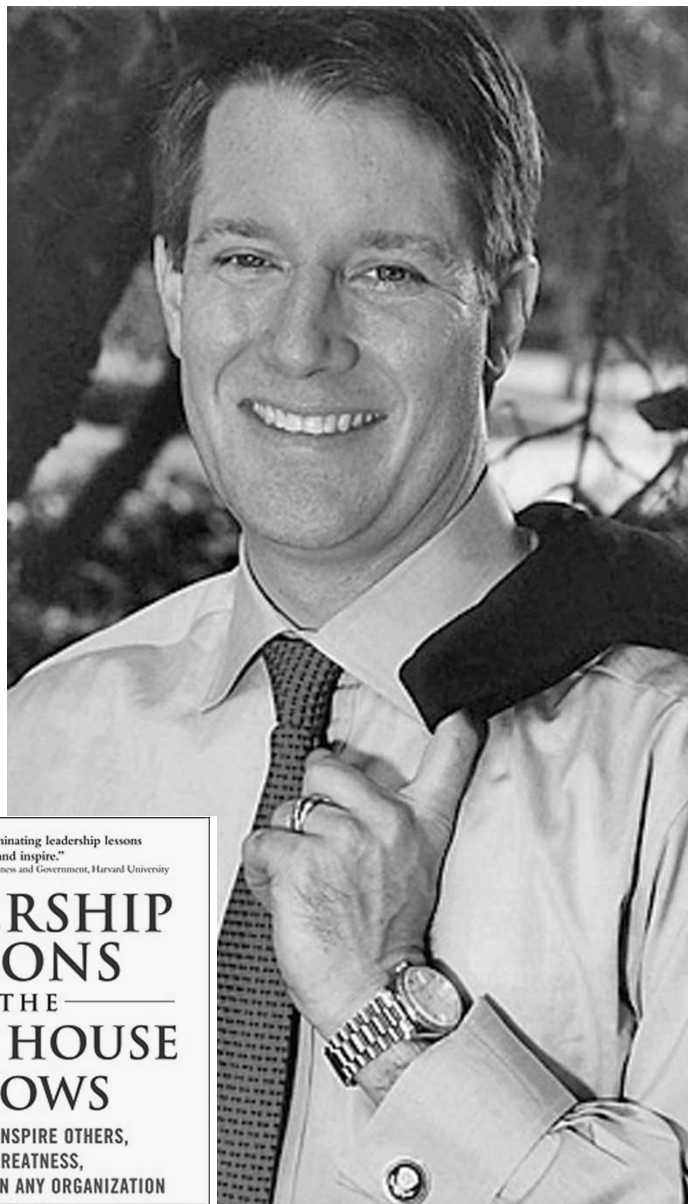


# Leadership Lessons from White House Fellows

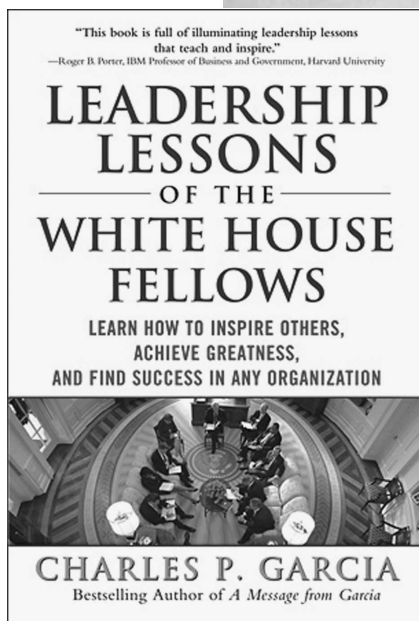


by *Melissa Campbell*

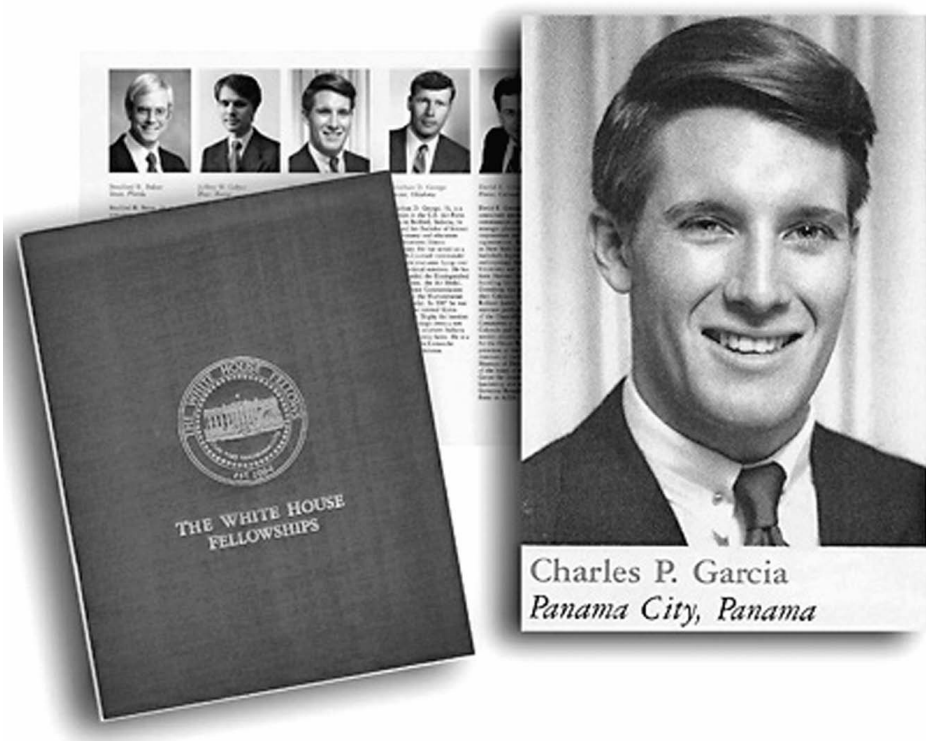
Established in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson, the White House Fellows program offers exceptionally talented young adults the opportunity to work alongside and learn from the nation's top level of government leaders. The idea originated with John Gardner, at the time president of the Carnegie Corporation. Author of the book *Excellence*, which won him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964, Gardner proposed a Presidential Corps formed to "select 100 of the ablest and most highly motivated young men and women in the nation for a 15-month period of service with the government." President and Lady Bird Johnson championed the idea and made it so, although the number of Fellows was pared down to 15 – one for each of the 10 Cabinet offices, one for the vice president and four in the office of the president. Lady Bird suggested the name White House Fellows.

Initially, only applicants between age 23 and 35 were accepted, but now there is no age limit. Nor are there quotas. According to former fellow Roger Porter ('74-'75), member of the President's White House Fellows Commission, excellence is the bar. And each year, between 11 and 19 new fellows are welcomed into the program to raise the bar, for themselves and for their country.

Gardner, one of the inaugural members of the White House Fellows Commission and later appointed secretary of health, education and welfare by President Johnson, called the fellows "a growing reservoir of exceptional individuals prepared to serve their country."



The fellowships typically last about a year. Fellows work as full-time, paid assistants to senior White House staff, the vice president, Cabinet secretaries and other top-ranking government officials, making an annual salary of about \$100,000. In return for the fellowship year, President Johnson expected the fellows to "repay that privilege" when they left by "continuing to work as private citizens on their public agendas." He hoped that the fellows would contribute to the nation as future leaders. He was not to be disappointed. Former White House Fellows through the years include: Tom Johnson ('65-'66), a cub reporter who went on to become publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* and then CEO of CNN; Jane Cahill Pfeiffer ('66-'67), who became the most powerful female executive in 1978 when NBC picked her to chair its board; Colin Powell ('72-'73), former secretary of state; Elaine L. Chao ('83-'84), former secretary of labor; Alexander S. Friedman ('98-'99), who went on to become CFO for the Bill & Melinda Gates



ent leadership qualities and providing lifelong contacts at the highest levels.

A new book from a former White House Fellow examines the program's universal leadership lessons. After interviewing more than 200 alumni, Charles P. García ('88-'89) gleaned 20 simple concepts critical to achieving success not only in leadership but in life as well. *Leadership Lessons of the White House Fellows: Learn How to Inspire Others, Achieve Greatness, and Find Success in Any Organization* (2009, McGraw Hill) not only teaches, it inspires, according to Porter, who is now the IBM Professor of Business and Government at Harvard University.

García, who also penned *A Message from Garcia*, walks the fellow talk: a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and Columbia Law School, García went on to found an investment banking firm in 1997, earning three entrepreneur-of-the-year awards. His service posts include spots on Fortune 500 boards as well as chairman of the Board of Visitors of the U.S. Air Force Academy. He also has devoted time and

Foundation; and Julissa Marengo ('07-'08), president, ZGS Station Group, former general manager of Telemundo's Washington, D.C., affiliate, the 16th Hispanic fellow.

From the beginning, the selection process was long and arduous, by design. The written application, an extensive series of questions and requirements looking to elucidate the candidates' achievements, potential for leadership and commitment to public service, consists of three parts: administrative data section, qualification narratives, and letters of recommendation. Four essays play an important role in not only testing an applicant's writing skills and ability to articulate clearly, they also indicate the applicant's potential for success as a fellow. One of the essays is a 500-word "Memorandum for the President" outlining and advocating a specific policy proposal. Another asks applicants to describe in 300 words or less their life's ambition.

Each application is read by at least three fellows. About 120 regional finalists are chosen for further consideration during round two of the process; they attend one of 10 regional panels held in major metropolitan areas. Between 30 and 34 applicants make it to the next round, a three-day interview process called selection weekend. Conducted by the President's White House Fellows Commission, this series of intensive interviews culminates in a closed-door discussion in which the commissioners make their final selections.

According to the White House Fellows Web site, fellows are often placed in areas outside of their professional experience. Responsibilities range from "chairing interagency meetings and designing and implementing federal policies to drafting speeches for Cabinet secretaries to representing their agencies on Capitol Hill and in international treaty negotiations." Job assignments are made by the director of the President's Commission on White House Fellowships, in consultation with agency officials.

Fellowships are often transformational for participants, crystallizing inher-

talent to furthering education in his home state of Florida, where he has served on the state Board of Education.

García chairs the advisory board of ENLACE, designed to increase the number of Hispanics in higher education in Florida, and serves on the board of the National Society of Hispanic MBAs, working on a strategy to diversify the country's leadership by widening the pipeline of Hispanics in business with a master's degree.

"Education is my passion," he explained. "My mother was a teacher, and she imbued in me the importance of education."

In a sense, his book reflects this passion, providing 20 lessons for leadership that reflect simple but powerful truths that used our government as their classroom.

Both accessible and entertaining, these lessons are sandwiched between several introductory chapters that outline the history of the program and several concluding chapters that describe the application and placement process. Drawing on his interviews with alumni fellows, García weaves together recurring themes, illustrating them with anecdotes.

**Leaders Know There's More to Life Than Work** – The first lesson is the importance of work-life balance, which is appropriately outlined by presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin ('67-'68), who not only had the opportunity to hear this advice firsthand from several presidents she profiled but to put it into practice in her own life. As she told García, it didn't matter if her next book came out in five years or 10 years, but it did matter to her children if she was there when they got home from school. Clearly, this approach did not limit her achievements: she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for her book *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*.

**Leaders Root Out Prejudice in Themselves and Others** – University of Chicago Professor Pastora San Juan Cafferty ('69-'70), who served her fellowship year working for Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe, personally witnessed her mentor's passion for equality and

learned how a leader can level the playing field for his or her team. When a strict “no-women” policy prohibited Volpe from having Cafferty join him for lunch at the Coast Guard mess, he recognized the inappropriateness of the policy and got it changed. When Cafferty brought to Volpe’s attention that White and Black workers in his department were segregated by floor, he insisted that they be integrated within the year. Cafferty, who devoted her research career to issues of race and ethnicity in American society, recalls that every week she and Volpe would review recruitment and promotion statistics in the department to look at racial diversity. “I learned that if a leader said something had to be done and then measured it and held people accountable, it happened, no matter how difficult it was to do,” she said.

**Leaders Energize Their People** – Chapter 16 defines a critical component to leadership: energy. Put another way, leaders energize their people. This lesson came as a surprise to García, he admits. “I remember asking John Gardner, if he had to pick one quality of leadership, what would it be. I thought his answer might be integrity, hope, charisma, but he said, ‘In my view, energy is the most important quality. No one wants to follow a tired leader.’” Gardner went on, García recounts, to say that leaders have boundless energy: they walk into a room and leave people floating on helium. And after this conversation with Gardner, García realized how true this statement was, and it became the foundation for the chapter.

**Leaders Know When to Compromise** – García writes that one of the most difficult choices a leader will face is when to compromise and when to stand firm. The wrong choice on a critical issue, he continues, can destroy a leader’s effectiveness. Attorney Nelson Díaz (’77-’78) revealed that he learned the importance of being flexible in getting the job done. Working for Vice President Walter Mondale, Díaz recounts a series of events that dramatically changed course with the news that, unbeknownst to Mondale, President Carter had signed an arms sale agreement with Saudi Arabia. Mondale quickly revised travel plans to meet with Jewish leaders in L.A., knowing that the arrangement would not sit well with the Jewish community. According to Díaz, Mondale “never gave a hint that he had no idea the deal was going to happen.” Mondale explained the genesis of the president’s decision and then asked how the administration could be more responsive to the needs of the Jewish community. Díaz recalls that the vice president made something positive come out of the meeting. “I witnessed his loyalty to the president and his ability to compromise. I learned then that sometimes half a loaf is better than no loaf at all.” He put that lesson into practice years later as general counsel to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, where he refined it even further. In resolving his cases, he said he made a point of demonstrating his willingness to listen to all sides. “Compromise and loyalty do go hand in hand,” he explained. “But you must also do everything you can to directly and openly engage the individuals with whom you disagree.” But once a leader makes a decision, he said, you need to practice the art of compromise and proceed with the final decision as if it were your own.

**Leaders Are Problem Solvers** – García recounts an important lesson he learned early on in his military career from his most important teacher and mentor, General John R. Galvin, to whom he was special assistant. Several days after receiving his first assignment, García met with the general brimming with questions about how he ought to deal with the various challenges encountered. The general rebuked him with what would become an important lesson in leadership. “Lieutenant!” he shouted. “Don’t bring me problems; bring me solutions.” And as García would



Julissa Marenco (’07-’08), President, ZGS Station Group, the 16th Hispanic White House Fellow

soon learn, the general meant solutions in the plural sense, requesting three different solutions and a recommendation for which one to employ. The general explained that “If you discipline yourself to think of at least three different ways to solve a problem, you will be forced to look at things from a different perspective, and you’ll never grasp at the first solution that comes to mind.” From this, García learned that a leader helps his people to conceptualize and solve problems independently, resisting the urge to micromanage.

### The Future of the Fellows

In recent years, applications to the White House Fellowship program have declined, and alumni are working their spheres of influence to attract, recruit and champion prospective applicants. In an era in which President Obama is stressing personal responsibility for all citizens, the tide may turn dramatically for the fellowship program as people across the country realize the difference one person can make. And as the hallowed halls of fellowship alumni indicate, the impact one year in one program can make for our nation is truly remarkable.

*Note: García has agreed to donate the profits from his book to the White House Fellows Foundation and Association. To learn more about the White House Fellows program and to download an application, visit [www.whitehouse.gov/about/fellows](http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/fellows).*



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