



How a Twentysomething Eagle Scout Became One of Donald Trump's Top Trade Hands

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As the Trump administration tees up a slew of highly aggressive new trade policies that could upend economic relations on several continents, experts outside the government and on the Hill are concerned over the team leading the charge.

More than a year into this presidency, the office at the USTR remains severely understaffed. The agency, technically a division of the White House, remains without a permanent deputy trade representative in key regions such as China and the Western Hemisphere. The Senate has yet to confirm ambassador to the World Trade Organization.

But beyond who is not there, it's who is that has raised alarm.

Robert Lighthizer, the U.S. Trade Representative, is relying on a small group of relatively unseasoned officials to advance a complex agenda, including renegotiating landmark free trade deals and cracking down on allegedly unfair practices by China, Mexico, and other major global economic partners. None have drawn more scrutiny and attention within the trade policy community than G. Payne Griffin, Lighthizer's deputy chief of staff.

Few, if anyone, in trade circles knew of Griffin prior to his appointment by Lighthizer. That's because, prior to his appointment by Lighthizer, Griffin was not in trade circles. Griffin attended American University where, by all accounts, he was an exemplary student. He graduated with a bachelors in economics and political science in 2014 and made the Dean's List. His first job out of college was as a staff assistant for Rep. Spencer Bachus (R-AL). By January 2015, he was a legislative correspondent for Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL), a job that typically involves corresponding with constituents and helping senior staff craft policy.

Typically, a stint as an LC lends itself to higher-ranking jobs within a congressional office. But in Griffin's case, those next steps were skipped. Sessions was the first and most prominent Senate endorser of then presidential candidate Donald Trump, which meant that once Trump won the election, he had heavy influence over staffing the administration.

In September 2016, a month before the campaign ended, Griffin was placed on the Trump presidential transition team's "landing team" at the office of the United States Trade Representative. Shortly thereafter, Griffin—not even three years out of college—was appointed deputy chief of staff at USTR, one of the more powerful perches in U.S. trade policy.

As part of the resume he submitted to the USTR—a resume obtained by the progressive watchdog group American Oversight and sent to *The Daily Beast*—he noted among his leadership skills that he was an Eagle Scout. The work experience portion included his stint as an "executive intern" at the College Republican National Committee.

Neither Griffin nor USTR nor the White House returned a request for comment.

That Griffin was tapped for the job says more about the Trump administration than it does about Griffin himself. A year into the Trump administration, a high-level leadership vacuum exists at numerous agencies, forcing Trump to rely on young, inexperienced officials to fill important positions in the federal government. As *The Washington Post* reported, the president is relying on a 24-year-old former campaign staffer to help run the White House's top drug policy job, despite the staffer's own dubious professional qualifications.

Part of the staffing issues Trump has confronted are of his own making. A good chunk of the GOP's political professional class has scoffed at joining the administration out of disgust with the president. But in the case of trade policy, the difficulties also have to do with the unorthodox agenda that Trump has pushed.

That agenda has occasionally aligned the Trump administration with some of its most vehement critics. Progressive trade policy reform advocates and liberal Democrats in Congress have found Lighthizer to be far more receptive to their concerns than Froman was, and, despite disagreements in other policy areas, Trump's trade policy preferences to be more in line with their own.

"Donald Trump promised the American public he would hire the 'best people,' but everywhere you look, he's filled key jobs with under-qualified and inexperienced political loyalists," said Austin Evers, executive director of American Oversight. "There are thousands of jobs at stake at the NAFTA negotiating table and you can be sure that Canada and Mexico aren't sending their B-teams."

Lighthizer has another deputy chief of staff, Pamela Marcus, who led Skadden Arps' trade practice for 25 years. But those who interact with the office say she is not an active presence on the Hill or other meetings. Griffin, by contrast, has appeared to stake out a major role. He has attended dozens of meetings with senior congressional aides, cabinet secretaries, and foreign government officials, according to internal USTR schedules obtained by journalist Russ Kick through a Freedom of Information Act request. He has flanked Lighthizer at high-level trade negotiation sessions, and was even pictured at the literal negotiating table during high-level discussions with Mexican and Canadian officials over the future of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The only other U.S. officials present were Lighthizer, his general counsel, and the U.S.'s chief NAFTA negotiator.

To a person, those who know or have interacted with Griffin say he is capable, smart, and exceedingly kind. Don Fulsom, a professor of his at American University, called him “one of my best students, ever,” noting that Griffin went on to study at the London School of Economics, played a leadership role in the classroom and even took the initiative of constructing a website for the course’s subject matter: a thorough investigation into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Fulsom had not heard about Griffin’s career trajectory and said he was “astounded at that kind of rise.” But, he added. “I don’t doubt that he has a lot of ability and talent. Whether he should be that high is for not me to say.”

Prior deputy chief of staffs at USTR have certainly had far more experience. Griffin’s immediate predecessor, Benhaz Kibria, served as an associate at the firm Hogan and Hartson, then as an assistant general counsel at the USTR, and then as trade counsel for the House Ways and Means Committee, before becoming taking on that position. And those who’ve worked with Griffin say it appears he is in over his head.

“Everyone says he’s a nice guy, but doesn’t really know much about trade,” said a source familiar with USTR operations.

Critics, including some former USTR staffers who declined to go on the record, have worried that the relative inexperience inside USTR—not just Griffin’s specifically—will hamper the agency as it attempts to dramatically reshape U.S. trade policy around the world.

“To a large extent, the bureaucracy can operate on autopilot, but that presumes a continuation of a predecessor’s agenda,” explained Scott Lincicome, a trade attorney and policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute. “When you are trying to go in a radically new direction... staffing matters, and that’s both at the career bureaucrat level and the political appointee level.”

Vacancies in senior positions at USTR, and a subsequent reliance on less experienced staff members, can place the U.S. at a disadvantage in trade negotiations, Lincicome told *The Daily Beast*.

“Other nations’ top negotiators might not want to negotiate with our underlings,” he said. “They need assurances that the person at the table is speaking for the president, and speaking for the United States. So when you put a low level functionary at the table with a high level negotiator, that negotiator might not be willing to put forth his country’s best offer because he can’t be guaranteed that whatever’s put on the table will remain on the table.”

Beyond a potential diplomatic faux pas, trade policy can be extremely complex, especially when dealing with multilateral agreements that involve hundreds of tradeoffs and minutiae often hammered out over years of negotiations. It’s a difficult job for a seasoned veteran, Lincicome said, let alone a relative neophyte.

“It’s not an insult,” Lincicome said, “to say that I wouldn’t expect anybody at a junior level to really have a mastery of these complex issues.”