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Mike Leavitt, the man planning the Mitt Romney presidency

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Mike Leavitt is the most important figure in Mitt Romney's campaign you may have never heard of.

That's about to change.

Leavitt, the former Utah governor and Health and Human Services Secretary under President George W. Bush, has been tapped to head Romney's transition process and has quietly taken the first steps toward drawing up the blueprint for a new administration, according to multiple GOP sources.

As the point man for what is internally called "Project Ready," Leavitt is stepping into a post that historically gets little attention during the campaign but becomes the focal point of a government-in-waiting beginning the day after the election. And already, plugged-in Republicans from Washington to Salt Lake City are buzzing that Leavitt could make his own transition next January into the job of White House chief of staff or as a Valerie Jarrett-like personal counselor to a President Romney.

That's assuming, of course, that Romney wins. And on this score, the former Massachusetts governor's preparations are not necessarily presumptuous - it's typical for party nominees to begin their transition effort well before November and a nominee would, in fact, be negligent not to start planning for a possible victory as early as possible.

In an interview, Leavitt confirmed his involvement but said little about a process that is just underway.

"The most important thing is to let the campaign be the focus of attention and for us to very quietly do what needs to be done, and that's what we're engaged in," he said about the transition planning.

The job traditionally is filled by political insiders who enjoy the trust of the candidate - Bush picked prep school friend and gubernatorial Chief of Staff Clay Johnson while Obama chose former CAP chief and former Clinton Chief of Staff John Podesta - and the selection always says something about the man aspiring to move into 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

In the case of Romney, he's tapped somebody a lot like himself. Leavitt is Mitt Romney's Mitt Romney.

The Utahn, 61, hails from an old Mormon family, has run a business, leans right politically, but is no ideologue, and is as passionate about whiteboards as Romney is about PowerPoint. Both are steady, prudent men. There is one important area in their backgrounds where they differ, however. Though it's little known even in the political class, Leavitt has deep experience as a campaign operative. He worked in Utah campaigns in the '70s and '80s and for legendary pollster Richard Wirthlin in Ronald Reagan's 1984 reelection.

Since installing Romney to take over the troubled 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Leavitt and the GOP nominee have become close. They're contemporaries, share a circle of high-powered intimates in politics and business and their wives are friends.

(Also on POLITICO: Honoring Olympics, Mitt Romney celebrates his resume)

"We've spent a fair amount of time together since the Olympics," said Leavitt, who served in the Bush administration until January of 2009. "And when we were together, we'd talk about where the country was headed, whether Mitt should run, family - just the kinds of things friends talk about."

One Romneyland figure said Leavitt's influence is derived from the fact that he is a spoke in many of the concentric circles around the candidate. Leavitt is part of Romney's orbit of Mormon associates, but he also sits in the realm of the policy gurus, political counselors, fellow governors and veterans of the Salt Lake Olympics.

So with little fanfare, he has become one of the most influential advisers to the candidate this election cycle. He has an office at the Boston headquarters, travels with Romney at times, has been summoned to rally donors and is tight enough with the high command that he scored an invite to campaign manager Matt Rhoades's engagement party last month.

He's also a surrogate and has headlined health care policy discussions at \$10,000 per-person Beltway fundraisers for Romney.

Romney officials say Leavitt is often circumspect but has an E.F. Hutton-like effect when he does speak up; many in Boston believe he offers much of his advice directly to Romney - something Leavitt suggests is accurate.

"I don't have a formal role," Leavitt said. "I attend the meetings where decisions are made, sit in the back row and do my best to contribute at moments I think I should contribute or do so privately."

He's also been a calming influence at critical times.

Just before the end of the year, when Romney's prospects in Iowa and beyond were in doubt, Leavitt ran a conference call with some of the campaign's major fundraisers. He gently reminded the nervous money crowd that, regardless of the caucus results, the campaign had a pathway to the nomination, according to a source on the call.

Among Romney's close advisers, there is high regard for Leavitt because he's seen as being in Boston for the right reasons.

"He's 100 percent in it for Mitt, no secret agenda for himself," said one Romneyite.

Rhoades said: "Gov. Leavitt has been a trusted asset and adviser to our campaign from its very beginning."

In an even and quiet voice, the governor-turned Cabinet member laid on the self-deprecation when asked about his role.

"I jokingly tell people that there's an old horse-racing analogy that when you've got a thoroughbred, you occasionally put a goat in the thoroughbred's stall to calm him down," Leavitt said. "I'm the goat."

In fact, say people who know him, he's more like a similar stock of stallion.

Republicans who have worked with Leavitt describe him in almost eerily Romney-like terms - a hands-on executive who's driven more by data than by ideology, a high-energy if vanilla technocrat who reads heavily in his spare time.

"He would make a great chief of staff in the White House," said former Utah Sen. Robert Bennett, who served when Leavitt was in office. "He was a very pragmatic governor. He was not particularly ideological and I think the tea party folks would not be that happy with him. ... He and I saw the world a lot alike. He can also be very tough."

Bennett, who lost his seat to a conservative GOP primary challenger in 2010, said Leavitt was a governor who outfoxed his opponents by "doing his homework" and compared him favorably to his successor, Jon Huntsman.

"There wasn't any time in the Leavitt administration where the governor didn't know what was going on. Huntsman was a little more laid back and the contrast between them was noted in the state," Bennett said. "He was known for his walking meetings - you'd schedule a meeting with the governor and it would last 15 minutes and the two of you would be walking rapidly from one place to the next. He would have standing-up meetings because he said if you're standing up instead of sitting down, you get through it faster."

Former Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating, who said he had been friends with Leavitt since the Utahn met with him in 1994 to "interview me as a candidate for governor," described his onetime colleague as a "pragmatic conservative."

"There are those of us who are social and economic conservatives - as is Mike - but who also want to get things done," said Keating. "We have some people in our house who would rather burn the house down than call the fire department, particularly at the state level."

Though he was known as being a committed federalist during his decade as governor, Leavitt was often described as a moderate.

"That's probably by Utah standards," he said when asked to explain his politics. "I'm clearly center-right."

Leavitt's longtime chief aide, Rich McKeown, said Leavitt's views "kind of depend on the issue."

"He's a market guy on fiscal issues, but on a number of things, people would say he's a moderate," said McKeown. "I would say he's a sensible, rational person. "

Leavitt has said some relatively positive things about certain elements of Obama's health reform law, suggesting earlier this year that "Obamacare" empowers the HHS secretary "to do certain things that are clearly aimed at trying to move us in the right direction."

McKeown, who still works with Leavitt at his Utah-based health care consultancy, acknowledged that the former governor does not want to undo one key part of the controversial legislation.

"We believe that the exchanges are the solution to small business insurance market and that's gotten us sideways with some conservatives," he said.

The exchanges are not only a matter of principle for Leavitt - they're also a cash cow.

The size of his firm, Leavitt Partners, doubled in the year after the bill was signed as they won contracts to help states set up the exchanges funded by the legislation.

"There is a group [of states] that feels as though they don't want to be associated with the Affordable Care Act," Leavitt told POLITICO in 2011. "Privately, though, it's clear that several of those are planning behind the scenes, because they don't want to have a federal exchange." The law is written so that those states that don't create their own exchanges by 2014 may be pushed into a federal exchange.

This angers the right, however.

"These Exchanges ... are the government bureaucracies that will make health insurance more expensive, induce employers to drop coverage, entrench Obamacare, and dole out hundreds billions of debt-financed government subsidies to insurance companies," fumed the libertarian-leaning **Cato Institute**.

Leavitt himself is an insurance man, coming from a family that owned their own insurance brokerage in Southern Utah. It was his father's other job, though, that got him into politics: Dixie Leavitt was a state senator. And when the elder Leavitt unsuccessfully ran for governor in 1976, he had his 25-year-old son Mike run the campaign.

The younger Leavitt then pursued a career as a political operative, handling the campaigns of Utah Republicans such as Sen's Jake Garn and Orrin Hatch.

"He was viewed as Utah's premier campaign strategist," said LaVarr Webb, a Utah Republican and former political editor of the Deseret News who got to know Leavitt as a source. "He was just real bright and had a smart political mind."

In 1984, he temporarily moved to Washington and was tasked by Wirthlin with helping on a group of northeastern states for Reagan - all of which the Gipper won.

"I take full credit for those states," Leavitt joked about an election in which the incumbent won 49 states.

Like many strategists before and since, Leavitt eventually sought elected office

himself. He was elected as Utah's governor in 1992.

Webb, who ran that campaign and served as a policy aide in the governor's office, described a chief executive who couldn't sit still.

"When we would hold senior staff meetings to go over the issues of the day he'd have his top lieutenants around, including the various subject area experts," said Webb. "Now a lot of political leaders will have subject area experts talk about issues, the pros and cons, then give their opinion and recommendation and then the executive will say I agree, disagree or let's talk more about this. What would happen in a Leavitt meetings is that it would start that way, and then invariably Leavitt would be up at whiteboard, leading the discussion rather than listening. He loves charting things out."

In his nearly three terms, Leavitt established a solid national reputation as a problem-solver.

Along with a group of fellow state executives, he established an accredited online college called Western Governors University that is still up and running. He also began an initiative that has doubled the number of engineers in the state - growth that has translated into job creation.

He did stints atop both the National Governors Association and the Republican Governors Association and earned a reputation as somebody who could see problems around the corner. Leavitt was a favorite of the late Washington Post reporter-columnist David Broder, who always kept an eye out for talent in state capitols.

"I confess that I'm an unabashed Leavitt fan," wrote Broder when the Utahn left his state job in 2003 to head the EPA, noting the governor's role in blocking a Bush administration effort to dismantle the National Governors Association.

Leavitt earned unfavorable national attention during his years as governor, however, when he claimed that polygamists were protected under the Constitution and said that they were "good people." Faced with a growing uproar amid cases of abuse in polygamist families, Leavitt backed off his statements.

After leaving Salt Lake City, Leavitt helmed the EPA for a little more than a year and then ran HHS for Bush's entire second term.

He clashed with some environmentalists and took heat for defending a Bush veto of a children's health insurance program, but won high marks for his leadership on pandemic preparation. Leavitt did receive some unwanted publicity in 2006 when it was revealed that he and his relatives had taken advantage of a loophole to receive millions in tax deductions for a family foundation that contributed little to charity.

Few who know him have much if anything critical to say, though.

His approach to government can earn plaudits from the Bob Bennetts of the world, but he doesn't appear to have any opponents on the right with knives drawn - at least, not yet.

Americans for Tax Reform head Grover Norquist, who sparred with Leavitt a decade ago over a proposal to tax Internet sales across state lines, summed up Leavitt in

these terms: "Good Republican, limited government, stable, not going to get you in trouble."

Former Deputy HHS Secretary Tevi Troy - who sits on Romney's health care policy committee - praised the former governor as an engaged policy thinker and avid reader, who also had a pol's human touch.

"I remember he read the [Stephen] Ambrose book on the railroads [Nothing Like It in the World.] He likened it to the health IT approach - how we were going to get health information technology, electronic medical records, up and running," Troy said. "For a lot of jobs, you have to have the policy smarts. But it also helps to have a politician's background."

When it comes to a potential Romney administration, Troy said: "I really don't see a job that's outside [Leavitt's] capabilities."

One Washington-based Mormon Republican insider wondered aloud if a President Romney would be willing to make a fellow Latter-Day Saint as his top aide.

"If he picked a bunch of non-Mormons for other administration jobs first, that would make it easier," said this Republican.

It may be moot - and not just in the case that Romney loses.

Several people who know Leavitt expressed skepticism that a man who's already headed two Cabinet departments would give up the freedom and other perks of a lucrative consulting business for another stint in the Executive Branch.

As to his plans in the case of a Romney presidency, Leavitt predictably demurred.

"I entered into this with the presumption that I'll continue in my private life," he said. "I've done this because anytime you're involved in a campaign there is patriotism involved and in my case there's also friendship involved. And lastly it's really interesting."

Asked if he was having fun, Leavitt sounded a Romney-esque note: "I refer to it as intellectually stimulating."