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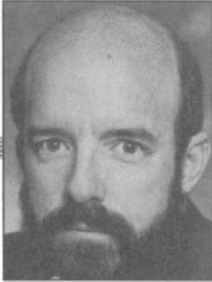
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Establishing the Bush Presidency

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George Bush began his presidency with the politics of consolidation. The policy directions of the Reagan Administration were reinforced, but not extended, and the major trends in the conduct of the Presidency were moderated, but not reversed. This article examines how George Bush accomplished three of the major tasks of a new President: putting his own stamp on the Presidency, grasping control of the executive branch, and establishing a *modus vivendi* with Congress. This article examines how President Bush conducted his transition into office, establishing his own persona and agenda. It then turns to how the Bush Cabinet and its relations with the White House staff differ from those of his predecessors, especially President Reagan's. Finally, it analyzes Bush's early dealings with Congress which were marked by compromise and conciliation. The conclusion is that President Bush performed successfully in these activities, but that his early presidency was marred by his failure to address the budget deficit issue.

President Bush was the first president elected to succeed a predecessor of his own party since 1928 and the first sitting Vice-President to be elected in his own right since 1836. But succeeding the President he served as Vice-President proved to be a mixed blessing. The easy parts of the Bush transition were: he had President Reagan's help, Republican Party loyalists held leadership positions in the executive branch, and no great changes in policy were necessary. The hard parts were a mirror of the easy side. Bush could not be seen to be rejecting his predecessor, yet he had to establish his own administration.

He could not dismiss Republicans loyalists too roughly, yet he had to make room for his own appointments. He could not change policy directions too sharply, yet he had to set a distinctive direction for his own Presidency.

I. Transition, Persona, and Agenda

Transition Planning

Only since the 1930s have the first few months in office of a new president been considered to be crucial to presidential success. With the systematic preparations of the Carter campaign and the impressive policy victories that the new Reagan Administration was able to win in the early months of his presidency, scholars began to pay renewed attention to the importance of the early months of a presidency. Preparation of some sort was seen as necessary to take advantage of the narrow window of opportunity at the beginning of each new administration.¹

Whatever the planning in 1988 that went into the preparations of the two candidates for the presidency, the experience with the large Reagan transition bureaucracy in 1980-1981 was enough to ensure that the transition organization of 1988-1989 would be considerably smaller in size. The Bush transition teams in departments and agencies were low-level contact points rather than the policy oriented and personnel channels that the Carter and Reagan transition teams were.²

In his first year in office President Bush established his Administration as one of consolidation. The policy directions of the Reagan Administration were reinforced, but not extended; the major trends in the conduct of the presidency were moderated, but not reversed. The White House staff was not as dominant as it had been in recent administrations, Cabinet secretaries had more leeway, and political appointments were not as tightly controlled by the Office of Presidential Personnel. Despite the Tower nomination, the President demonstrated a willingness to bargain and compromise with Congress; though neither the President nor Congress showed a willingness to confront the deficit issue. In his first year President Bush was successful in his conduct of the presidency, but failure to attempt to deal with the deficit jeopardized the future of the U.S. economy and long-term security.

At Christmas of 1987 Chase Untermeyer offered to undertake a low visibility transition planning operation. Bush agreed, though he insisted on extreme discretion, since at that time it was by no means certain that Bush would survive the Republican primaries, much less be elected the next November. Later in the campaign it became likely that Untermeyer would become the director of Presidential Personnel in a future Bush Administration. Nevertheless, Bush forbade him to take any steps to assemble the beginnings of a personnel operation. He could not set up an office, establish mail handling operations, create computer programs, or even recruit his own staff, much less do any actual personnel planning. Bush also insisted that the small operation be entirely separate from the campaign and from the Office of the Vice-President.³

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to a Bush Administration
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Symbolic Changes

President Reagan paved the way for the hoped-for Bush transition in unprecedented ways. In contrast with the lukewarm support Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson gave their Vice Presidents, Reagan campaigned long and hard for Bush, traveling many thousands of miles and visiting key states. Personnel changes in the cabinet in 1988 were molded to fit Bush priorities: Attorney General Meese resigned; and Secretaries of Education, Treasury, and Justice were appointed who were acceptable to Bush and whom he would keep on in his Administration. Immediately after the election resignations were requested from all Reagan political appointees so that a newly inaugurated President Bush would not be the one to deliver the bad news.

Despite all of these careful preparations, President Elect Bush faced a difficult situation in the transition to his own presidency. His campaign made it clear that he saw no need for basic changes in direction from the Reagan Presidency; there would be policy continuity between the two presidencies. This made it more difficult for Bush to establish his own Administration and not seem merely to preside over a third Reagan term.

Thus in his first months in office President Bush engaged in what might be called "the semeiotics of dissimilarity," that is, symbolic changes.⁴ During the transition and inauguration the extended Bush family was highly visible, a subtle contrast to the Reagans' family disputes, with three books by Reagan children casting unfavorable light on the Reagans as parents. The President met very publicly with Black leaders on Martin Luther King day ceremonies, a sharp contrast with President Reagan who had criticized the motives of civil rights leaders in a television appearance in the last week of his presidency.⁵

The President's early public statements placed heavy emphasis on the importance that high ethical standards

would play in his administration, a not-so-subtle contrast with what had become known as the "sleaze factor" in the Reagan Administration. But this issue turned around to bite him several weeks later when conflict of interest concerns were raised about C. Boyden Gray, James Baker, and John Tower. Early press stories emphasized the way in which George Bush would be a "hands-on" president, dealing with the details of policy issues. He also kept working hours from about 7 am to 6 pm, in contrast with Reagan's usual 9 to 5 schedule. Reporters were told of the many phone calls he made every day to "keep in touch" and not allow himself to be isolated by the White House staff.

President Reagan had been criticized for refusing to hold press conferences and for not being available for reporters' questions. President Bush held more news conferences in his first 80 days in office than President Reagan did during his last two years in office. Reagan held 50 news conferences in his eight years; they were usually highly structured and lasted precisely 30 minutes.⁶ Bush's were much less managed and often went beyond the time allotted.⁷ Bush even invited reporters to social occasions at the White House or at his home in Kennebunkport, Maine.

One of the ironies of these consciously planned contrasts between the two presidents was the White House claim that President Bush had a disdain for the symbolic and rhetorical aspects of the Presidency, implying that Reagan emphasized symbol over substance. After a campaign in which his "handlers" played such an important role, President Bush went out of his way to present himself as spontaneous and non-scripted. "This presidency doesn't have an image maker," asserted Stephen Studdert, a White House aide.⁸

The cumulation of these conscious contrasts and the willingness of White House staffers to call press attention to them prompted a letter from Richard Nixon to John Sununu. Nixon admonished Sununu and told him that Bush appeared ungrateful for Reagan's support in the campaign and that he might need Reagan's support in the future. Sununu rebuked the White House staff, and Bush called Mr. Reagan to apologize.⁹ Bush enjoyed an early honeymoon with the press in which he was favorably contrasted with President Reagan. The honeymoon, however, did not extend to his policy agenda—or rather the asserted lack thereof.

The Bush Policy Agenda

By March 1989 complaints began to be made publicly that the Administration lacked momentum, grand design, new direction, or as George Bush put it, "the vision thing." This perception existed in part because the Administration had become bogged down in the Tower battle with

Congress and in part because no largescale new initiatives were seen by the Administration as major priorities of the Bush presidency.

To be sure there were a number of important initiatives: the savings and loan bailout, the Latin American debt crisis, drug initiatives, education proposals, environmental cleanup, ethics proposals, etc.; but nothing dominated the agenda or captured the public imagination.¹⁰

In the face of this criticism President Bush felt the need to confront it publicly. "I don't have an agenda where I have to get six items done....I'm not thinking in terms of 100 days."¹¹ "A lot is happening. Not all of it good, but a lot is happening."¹² The Administration made the argument that not every presidency ought to have a grand vision or lead the nation off on a new crusade. The Bush Administration, after all, had campaigned on a platform of continuity with the major policies of the Reagan years.

The idea that each new administration ought to accomplish major agenda changes in its first 100 days is relatively new and seldom accomplished. Only unusual circumstances allow newly elected presidents to push through major legislative changes. On the other hand, White House staffers of recent administrations emphasize that if a new president wants to achieve significant policy changes his best opportunity lies within a narrow window at the beginning of an administration. According to H.R. Haldeman, "Your power is going to start eroding from January 20th on."¹³

Despite appearances of a lack of strategic vision, President Bush must be given credit for attempting to deal with some of the festering problems left over from the Reagan Administration: a bailout for the savings and loan industry, the clean up of nuclear weapons production plants, and the scandals at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. These were tough issues; on the other hand, critics pointed out that the President seemed willing to take credit for proposing major initiatives in education, the environment, and space exploration without specifying how they would be paid for.

President Bush, whose declared strength was foreign policy, took four foreign trips in his first six months in office, more than most other newly elected presidents. He demonstrated a combination of flexibility and restraint. He was able to come to an agreement with West Germany on the modernization of U.S. short range missiles. In May he regained the initiative in arms control by countering Gorbachev's proposals on conventional weapons reductions with a proposed 20 percent U.S. troop reduction in Europe. Bush demonstrated restraint in the U.S. reaction to the killing of a U.S. hostage in the Middle East and threats to kill another. His immediate response was to use personal diplomacy with other world leaders rather than precipitous military action. He resisted congressional pressures to respond more harshly to the Chinese government's crackdown on dissidents. In his visits to Poland and Hungary he encouraged the opening of their political systems but refrained from rhetoric that would aggravate strains between the East Block countries and the Soviet Union.

The Administration's policy agenda in its first year seemed to be reactive rather than strategic. It reflected the President's style, which was to be a problem solver rather than a visionary, a doer rather than a dreamer. A former chief of staff characterized the President: "He's almost like the captain on the bridge of a ship. The captain on the bridge of a ship isn't up there creating strategy. He's already got the strategy when he's at sea."¹⁴

II. Controlling the Executive Branch

White House Staff and Cabinet

Bush's initial White House staff was experienced (24 of 29 had previous White House experience) and professional, though not of high previous public visibility.¹⁵ The status of positions was cut, with only 14 staffers having the title of "Assistant to the President," in contrast to 22 in the Reagan White House. Pay levels were also lower than in the Reagan Administration.

A near consensus among presidents and scholars has formed that the contemporary presidency needs a chief of staff. No president since Johnson has left the White House without one. The role can be that of a strong chief (Adams, Haldeman, Regan) or as a "neutral broker" (Cheney, Watson, James Baker).¹⁶

There was no hesitation on the part of president elect Bush about the need for a chief of staff. Craig Fuller had been his chief of staff in the Vice Presidency and was one of the main candidates to continue in the role when Bush assumed the presidency. After several weeks of nondecision, Bush finally chose John Sununu, the governor of New Hampshire who had helped Bush considerably in the primaries. Fuller left the Administration after his role as codirector of the transition ended with the inauguration.

Early in the transition it appeared that Sununu would adopt the "strong" approach to the chief of staff position, as an earlier New Hampshire governor, Sherman Adams, had done in the Eisenhower Administration. Bush had asked Robert Teeter, who had played a major role in the campaign, to stay on in the White House in a position as deputy chief of staff with control over domestic policy, speech writing, and communications. But Sununu insisted that Teeter not be allowed to have access to the Oval Office without Sununu being present.¹⁷ Finally, Teeter decided not to join the White House "for personal reasons."

Despite his personality and others' expectations, after six months in office Sununu had not turned into another Sherman Adams or Donald Regan. A senior White House staffer made the contrast: "He's secure enough to admit mistakes, and Don wasn't."¹⁸ Sununu spent about one third of his time with the President and did not seem to act as a strict gatekeeper for access to the President. Much of this was due to George Bush's presidential style which stressed personal contact with people in and outside of the Administration. He tended to deal with his cabinet secre-

taries directly, rather than through his chief of staff as had President Reagan.¹⁹ Bush also kept in touch with those in his Administration and others through extensive use of personal phone calls, often reaching down through the hierarchy to get the opinion of lower level officials. When a U.S. hostage was threatened with death, Bush personally called eight heads of state or prime ministers to ask for their help.²⁰

President Bush took 65 days to designate his cabinet, which was composed of competent, experienced people with cumulatively more than a century of experience with previous administrations.²¹ In the first meeting of his cabinet, President-elect Bush said that he would tell them to “think big” and “challenge the system.” “I want them to be frank; I want them to fight hard for their position. And then when I make the call, I’d like to have the feeling that they’d be able to support the president.” In dealing with the Hill, he said: “We’re going to have some fights with Congress, but we’re not going to approach it as though we’re dealing with the enemy....”²²

Bush intended to continue the cabinet council system of the second Reagan term, with three councils: Economic Policy, chaired by Treasury Secretary Brady; Domestic Policy, chaired by Attorney General Thornburgh; and National Security, chaired by the President’s advisor for national security, Brent Scowcroft. The Domestic and Economic Councils met for one hour every other week during the first six months of the Administration.²³ The design of the policy development process was heavily influenced by Roger Porter, Assistant to the President for Economic and Domestic Policy. Porter had pioneered the cabinet council idea in the Ford Administration and helped to implement it for President Reagan.

Porter’s analysis of “multiple advocacy” as a model for advising the President also influenced the Bush White House.²⁴ Bush’s preference was for oral briefings (in contrast to Nixon and Carter’s preference for written option papers), and for direct confrontation of those on opposing sides of policy issues. To help the President deliberate on policy issues White House aides set up “scheduled train wrecks” in which Administration officials would engage in policy disagreements and answer questions from the President. The President said that his approach to staff advice was “...get good, strong, experienced people, encourage them to express their views openly, encourage them not to hold back.”²⁵

While coordination with White House staff was enforced, cabinet secretaries close to the President were given significant leeway in policy development. At times in the early months of the Bush Administration cabinet secretaries took initiatives without checking with the White House first.²⁶ This may mark a change from the dominant role of the White House staff in recent presidencies and a greater dependence on cabinet secretaries for leadership in their areas of jurisdiction. “The President has a lot of confidence in the Cabinet members, and he gives them a lot of latitude to act,” according to Cabinet Secretary David Bates.²⁷

The White House staff role was to act as brokers rather than to ride herd on cabinet secretaries, an appropriate role for White House staffers, as long as the President’s policies are being implemented. The Bush staff early in his Administration was in marked contrast to the dominant White House staff of Ronald Reagan.²⁸ Bush was much more likely to talk directly with his cabinet secretaries and to assert personal control in policy making than was Ronald Reagan.²⁹

Direct communication between the President and Cabinet members is the most effective way to keep the White House staff on tap rather than on top.³⁰ One senior White House official characterized the Bush White House staff: “This staff is precisely what Bush wants: nice people who will not handle him or try to, people who are technically competent and without much ideology, people who will not usurp power that belongs to the President and cabinet.”³¹

The first year of the Administration was not marred by the tensions and rivalries among its major foreign policy officials that had hurt the Nixon, Carter, and Reagan Presidencies. Brent Scowcroft, Richard Cheney, and James Baker had worked together in previous administrations, and President Bush insisted on collegiality.

By the summer of 1989 it appeared that President Bush might have formed the most influential cabinet since President Eisenhower in terms of the willingness of the President to give cabinet secretaries the latitude within which to operate in their jurisdictions. It is ironic that President Bush, one of the few recent Presidents who did not talk about “cabinet government,” may have come closest to implementing it. The influence of cabinet secretaries individually, however, did not extend to them as a collectivity. The cabinet met about once a month and was “used more for a briefing session,” than for policy deliberation, according to Secretary to the Cabinet David Bates.³² The use of the full cabinet as a deliberative body had greatly diminished since its effective use by President Eisenhower. This was due to its increased size (with 14 cabinet departments in 1989), but more importantly to the cross cutting nature of most presidential policy issues and the president’s need for advice from a broader perspective than that of individual department heads.³³

While collegiality and relative lack of conflict characterized the early months of the Bush Administration, it must be remembered that Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter began their Administrations with good intentions to delegate to their cabinet secretaries. Each, however, ended up with serious conflicts between cabinet secretaries and White House staffs, and each felt forced to demand resignations from his cabinet appointees.

Political Appointments

The fact that the transition to a Bush administration was a “friendly takeover” was a mixed blessing to personnel recruiter Chase Untermeyer. On the one hand, there

was no rush, as there would be with a party-turnover transition, to ensure that the opposition political party was out of office as soon as possible. Those people who chose to remain in policy making positions were loyal Republicans who were no threat to Bush priorities. On the other hand, since they were loyal Republicans and had supported George Bush, many hoped and expected to stay on into a Bush Administration. After all, they had high-level experience, and most were by that time qualified for the positions that they held.

But the Bush people felt that substantial turnover was needed to ensure that the new Administration would be Bush's and not merely an extension of the Reagan Administration.³⁴ There was no precedent since 1929 about how to deal with political holdovers from the same party after an election, but early after the election transition officials made it clear that they intended a major turnover of political personnel. While statements in the transition indicated an expected turnover in the 90 percent range, in the summer of 1989 about 35 percent of subcabinet appointees had also served in the Reagan Administration (not necessarily in the same position).³⁵

The Bush transition was flooded with applications and recommendations for jobs just as other recent transitions had been. By the time of inauguration about 16,000 resumes had been collected, including a special bequest by the Heritage Foundation of a ten foot stack of 2,500 resumes of conservatives that Heritage thought would benefit the Administration. Echoing former personnel directors, one official said that choosing from among so many resumes was like "trying to take a sip from a fire hydrant."³⁶ After the inauguration the volume kept up, and by the end of May more than 70,000 applications and recommendations had been received (though after eliminating duplicate resumes, the total number of files was closer to 45,000), a staggering mountain of paper.³⁷

The major criterion for all new Presidents in their appointments is loyalty, but loyalty comes in many guises: partisan, personal, ideological. The definition for his Administration was personal loyalty to Bush over many years. The Bush Administration's emphasis on personal loyalty, however, was mitigated with a heavy dose of respect for competence. Untermeyer told the story of a past mayor of Houston who spent most of his first term in office appointing his friends to positions, and because of their incompetence, had to spend most of his second term getting rid of them.³⁸

Bush's cabinet appointments were widely praised for their experience and competence, and some pointed out the irony of Bush's campaign rhetoric that the election was about ideology rather than competence. According to transition co-director, Craig Fuller, if personnel recruiters erred in selections, they decided "to err on the side of expertise and qualifications for the job. We don't run

around with a lot of litmus paper in our pockets. We want people who are philosophically and ideologically compatible, but we're really looking for the best people we can find."³⁹ The Bush personnel operation was a sharp contrast with Reagan recruitment efforts, about which White House official Lyn Nofziger said: "...As far as I'm concerned, anyone who supported Reagan is competent."⁴⁰

Another significant contrast with the Reagan administration was the willingness of President Bush to consider career public servants for presidential appointments and other high level positions. This policy decision reflected the shift in tone of President Bush from the previous administration which saw government as part of "the problem" and distrusted career civil servants.⁴¹

But the Bush transition was no exception to the general rule that any new president will be attacked by his own party for not appointing enough of the "party faithful." Richard Nixon was attacked by Robert Dole for not appointing enough loyal

Republicans. Jimmy Carter was attacked by the Democratic National Committee. Ronald Reagan was attacked by the right wing of his party, through their White House spokesman, Lyn Nofziger, for neglecting the true "Reaganites."⁴²

President Bush was put under pressure from his own appointees in the demand for appointments. The Secretary of Commerce, Robert Mosbacher, Sr., who was finance chairman for the Bush campaign publicly complained that not enough fundraisers were being appointed by the new Administration. "There's this perception...that fund-raisers and fund-givers are nice, interesting people to be sort of patted on the head when you need them and ignored the rest of the time because they don't really understand the process....Quite a high percentage of those who have been helpful haven't gotten anything—at least 50 percent."⁴³ *The New York Times* reported that there was a "must place" list of 50 major donors who wanted jobs for themselves or for their relatives. *The Times* also reported that more than a dozen major donors had been appointed to major ambassadorial posts.⁴⁴ The ratio of political to career chiefs of mission continued to remain at relatively high levels in the early months of the Administration, evoking expressions of concern that some ambassadorial appointments were undermining the professionalism of U.S. diplomacy.⁴⁵ The Administration argued, however, that the percentage of political chiefs of mission would be lower than in the Reagan Administration.⁴⁶

In general, however, the Bush personnel operation was not obsessed with narrow definitions of loyalty or White House control of all appointments as was the Reagan administration.⁴⁷ The Bush Administration, despite several major exceptions, decided to give significant leeway to

The White House staff role was to act as brokers rather than to ride herd on Cabinet secretaries, an appropriate role for White House staffers, as long as the President's policies are being implemented.

Cabinet secretaries to choose, in consultation with the Office of Presidential Personnel, their own management teams at the sub-cabinet level.⁴⁸ The argument for this approach is that cabinet secretaries are likely to be motivated to recruit qualified people and they ought to be able to have their own management teams to run their departments.⁴⁹

Untermeyer considered the function of the Office of Presidential Personnel to be to ensure that the political and policy interests of the President were protected. Those cabinet secretaries who were particularly close to the president (for example, James Baker, Nicholas Brady and Robert Mosbacher) had the greatest leeway in the choice of their subordinates. Others did not have a blank check, but neither did the Office of Presidential Personnel often operate with a heavy hand. Mutual accommodation was the rule. Untermeyer asserted that, as a matter of principle, "No department or agency chief will have an appointee forced down his or her throat, that is, imposed by the White House. Conversely, every decision is a presidential decision."⁵⁰

The Bush Administration did recognize the traditional patronage imperatives of U.S. politics and instructed their appointees that the Bush political operation wanted 700 or 800 (about half of Schedule C positions) reserved for campaign workers and key supporters. A "Special Schedule C Project" was set up in the Office of Presidential Personnel under the direction of the President's nephew, Scott Bush, to place long-time Bush supporters in departments and agencies. Lists of people were sent to agencies with strong recommendations from the Office of Presidential Personnel, though Schedule C appointments are legally agency head appointments.⁵¹ This placement of campaign personnel caused some administrative problems when departments had to absorb lists of people before sub-cabinet appointments had been made.⁵²

The internal clearance process for Bush appointees was simple compared to the Reagan process which had many veto points. Once Untermeyer and the cabinet secretary agreed on a person, the nomination went forward to Chief of Staff John Sununu and then to the President, with very few proposed nominations rejected by the President.⁵³ Unexpectedly, the Bush personnel operation functioned at a slower pace than had most previous Administrations. A number of factors contributed to the slowness of appointments, including more thorough FBI investigations and a slower Senate confirmation process. In addition, there was no great feeling of urgency on the part of the Administration to move too quickly, since loyal Republicans were still in office.

On 18 March 1989, eight departments and agencies had only one Bush appointee on board.⁵⁴ By April 1 only 28 policy-level appointments had been confirmed by the Senate, 22 had been nominated and were awaiting confirmation, and 97 had undergone initial background checks.⁵⁵ On 10 August, 156 of 394 of the top executive branch positions had been filled, according to Congressional Research Service calculations, but there were no nominations for 160 of the positions.⁵⁶ Even if the 60 nominees

who were awaiting Senate confirmation at that time were counted as on board, the absence of over 40 percent of policy level executives half way through the Administration's first year could not help but to hamper leadership of the executive branch.

Part of the reason for the slowness in appointments was the deliberate decision by George Bush not to let Untermeyer set up an office, pre-sort personnel resumes, or even recruit his own staff before the election. Much of the organizational work of the first month of the transition might have been done before the election, but Bush decided that the risk of distracting the campaign was too great.⁵⁷

III. Dealing with Congress

After the bitter campaign, George Bush got off to a surprisingly cordial relationship with Congress by making appropriate gestures of courtesy and receiving proffered statements of bipartisan support by the congressional leadership. Having himself served in the House and presided over the Senate, Bush had many friends in both chambers and on both sides of the aisle, an asset of no small value in congressional relations. In the first half of 1989 virtually all Senators and more than half of the members of the House had been invited to the White House for some function.⁵⁸ But the early positive attitudes and good relations were interrupted by a fight over the nomination of John Tower to be Secretary of Defense. The battle took on a life of its own and dominated the early months of the Bush Administration.

The crucial decision on the part of the Administration was to let the issue escalate from the fitness of John Tower to head the Department of Defense to the credibility of the President. Once the President's power became the issue, Republicans had to fall into ranks. The stakes were raised considerably, and the fight became much more partisan. If the President lost, it would be more than merely not having a particular man as Secretary of Defense, it would be a serious blow to the President's credibility.

The choice to nail the President's colors to the mast about the Tower nomination thus constituted the strategic decision of when to pick President Bush's first fight with the Democratic Congress. After the defeat of the Tower nomination, Bush was luckily able to recover and put the bitter fight behind him by the quick nomination of Richard Cheney, who had the respect of most members of Congress on both sides of the aisle. There was even some speculation that Cheney was Bush's first choice for Secretary all along, but that he chose Tower out of political obligation for the campaigning Tower had done for Bush in Texas since the 1960s.

In March 1989 Bush and Secretary of State James Baker were able to achieve a significant compromise with the Democratic Congress on an issue that had been a bitter bone of contention during the eight years of the Reagan Administration. Baker was able to forge a compromise with Congress in which the United States would supply

\$50 million in non-military aid to the Contras in Nicaragua until November 1989. The aid would continue beyond November only with the affirmative agreement of four key committee chairs and the congressional leadership who had to be satisfied that the aid was indeed being used for non-military purposes.

The president's counsel, C. Boydon Gray, publicly questioned whether this was not an unconstitutional abdication of presidential power to Congress and a violation of the separation of powers principle in granting, in effect, a legislative veto to Congress. Baker argued that the legislative veto issue was avoided because the agreement was contained in a letter rather than written into legislation. He also argued that this was the best deal he could get with the Democrats, particularly the liberals in the House. The alternative to the informal legislative veto, of course, was aid that extended through November, after which the Administration could come back to Congress with a new request for legislation.

The tone of compromise with the Democrats in Congress on aid to the Contras also characterized Bush's approach to other legislative issues. The President decided to build both the MX and the Midgetman missiles. He accommodated legislators' concerns on the savings and loan bailout, and he indicated a willingness to be flexible on the Administration's proposal to cut capital gains taxes. The bipartisan approach to legislation was enough to draw complaints from House minority whip Newt Gingrich that Bush was being too accommodating to the Democratic majority and insufficiently confrontational. Such complaints led the President to veto the proposed increase of the minimum wage, even though the difference between the Administration and the Democrats in Congress was only 30 cents per hour.

The Bush Administration was thus able to demonstrate its ability to deal with the Democrats in Congress despite the bruising fight over the Tower nomination. But the real test of the ability of the Administration and Congress to face up to the tough issues confronting the nation was the formulation of the budget and deficit reduction.

The National Economic Commission, among others, argued that the persistence of the huge budget deficits of the 1980s constituted a serious threat to the future of the U.S. economy. The Administration's first budget message included a number of spending proposals in the areas of child care, the environment, education, combatting drugs, etc., but it made no major attempt to deal with the deficit. It argued that the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings deficit reduction targets could be met for Fiscal Year 1990 while keeping the President's campaign promise not to increase taxes. It did this by adopting the economic assumptions of the outgoing Reagan Administration which the Congressional Budget Office pointed out were much more optimistic than those of most independent private forecasts. The Bush budget message proposed cuts in broad categories of domestic spending but did not specify which programs would be cut to reach the deficit reduction targets without an increase in taxes.

The budget agreement reached between the White House and Congress in mid April purported to meet the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings deficit target of \$100 billion for Fiscal Year 1990. The agreement, however, depended on optimistic economic assumptions, projected savings in existing programs, one-time asset sales, and \$5.3 billion in tax changes that were not specified. While the accord signalled the willingness of the Administration and Congress to come to agreement, it did not signify serious effort to confront the budget crisis. Finance Committee Chairman Senator Bentsen was so skeptical of the accord that he (along with Ways and Means chair Dan Rostenkowski) refused to attend the Rose Garden announcement ceremony.

In the summer the Administration wanted the first \$50 billion of the savings and loan bailout to be financed through bonds that would not be accounted through the federal budget document and thus not calculated in the deficit. In a bipartisan compromise the Administration and Congress decided that 40 percent of the initial \$50 billion would count in the deficit calculations and 60 percent would be raised off budget. Moreover, the 40 percent that counted would be charged against the FY 1989 budget and thus would not affect the GRH deficit calculations for FY1990.

Both sides admitted that the 1989 budget agreement was only a first step and not a long range solution to the deficit problem. They acknowledged that serious work would have to be done for Fiscal Year 1991. Of course, decisions for FY1991 would have to be made in calendar year 1990, an election year in which any bipartisan accord would be extremely difficult. The bipartisan budget agreements in 1989 constituted a conspiracy to use gimmicks and unrealistic projections to cover up the real size of the deficit and to ignore the necessity of making difficult choices to reduce it.⁵⁹

Conclusion: A Presidency of Consolidation

The new Bush Administration was marked by a preference for competence, not ideology. The President's style was one of reactive problem solving, not strategic vision. His approach to Congress (despite the Tower nomination) was one of compromise, not confrontation. His approach to policy disagreements was personal communication and diplomacy rather than "going public" to bring pressure to bear. The conciliatory personal style of the President, however, did not extend to his cabinet secretaries, some of whom were encouraged to take more confrontational positions than the President.⁶⁰

The Bush presidency in its first year might be characterized as one of consolidation, seeking a "new balance," not confrontation and change. Consolidation was necessary for three reasons: the "Reagan revolution": had worked itself out, the continuing huge deficits precluded large scale new programs, and the continued Democratic control of Congress made compromise part of the price of governing.

The policy changes of the Reagan revolution had worked themselves out over eight years and had gone as far as political forces would allow. Defense spending had increased quickly and substantially, but the increases had leveled off at the end of the Administration. Opinion polls had reversed from 1980 and indicated that the public felt the country was spending enough on defense. The large personal income tax cuts of 1981 were indexed, and the nation was spending much more than it received in revenues. There were significant personnel cuts on the domestic side of the government, though non means-tested entitlements continued to dominate the budget.

The huge deficits of the 1980s continued into President Bush's first year, leaving little room for new policy initiatives. Any new spending was made even more difficult by the funds that had to be spent to rescue the savings and loan system, clean up nuclear weapons production plants, and clean up the fiscal mess at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Gramm-Rudman-Hollings straightjacket left little room for maneuver and encouraged the use of accounting gimmicks to present the appearance of deficit reduction.

The backdrop of the policy environment was the continuing reality of divided government, with the Democrats maintaining strong majorities in both Houses of Congress. The 1988 elections produced few coattails, and the Democrats argued that the president did not have an unambiguous mandate. Thus President Bush was faced with the necessity of bargaining and compromising with Congress.

In 1989 the new Administration seemed to moderate some of the major trends in the modern presidency. Press attention and high visibility for the President and his family continued, but the political tactic of "going public" for partisan leverage was restrained. The public relations and staging skills perfected by the Reagan White House, however, were put to good use in the Bush presidency.

The power of the White House staff and the centralization of policy control in the White House had been increasing since 1961, reaching a peak in the Reagan White House. President Bush's confidence in his Cabinet Secretaries and the low key style of his White House staff moderated the trend, though the locus of power was not reversed. A new balance was established in White House-Cabinet relations, and the cabinet council system of the second Reagan term was institutionalized.

The control of political appointments, presidential and agency heads, by the White House personnel office reached a peak in the Reagan Administration. That control was not abandoned by the Bush White House, but it was modified in favor of more cabinet input. The attacks on government and the public service that gone on since 1968 were abandoned. The public rhetoric of President Bush about public service was much closer to that of John Kennedy than to Nixon, Carter, or Reagan.

The most important criticism of the Administration's first year in office was its failure to attempt any significant reductions in the continuing high budget deficits. Even OMB director Richard Darman in the summer of 1989 condemned "our collective short-sightedness" and "reluctance adequately to address the future" that the national debt and deficits represent. According to Darman the deficit "is the mathematical representation of our wish to buy now, pay later—or, more accurately, buy now and let others pay later."⁶¹

Recent research on the presidency has argued that a president's best chance to make major policy changes (without an externally imposed crisis) is in the first year in office. President Bush was thus open to the criticism that he squandered his narrow window of opportunity to deal seriously with the budget deficit.

Despite the fact that Congress also bears responsibility for fiscal policy, experience since the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 has shown that presidential leadership is necessary for major budget changes.⁶² President Reagan demonstrated such leadership in the historic changes in budget priorities he forced through Congress in 1981. It will take presidential leadership in the 1990s to deal with the consequences of those decisions.

In sum, in his first year in office President Bush must be given high marks for his conduct of the Presidency, but with the major reservation that continuing large deficits threaten the future of the U.S. economy and thus long term security.

* * *


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Notes

1. See Carl M. Brauer, *Presidential Transitions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Frederick C. Mosher, W. David Clinton, and Daniel G. Lang, *Presidential Transitions and Foreign Affairs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1987); James P. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running* (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988); see also the seven volume series on transitions: Papers on Presidential Transitions and Foreign Policy, edited by Kenneth W. Thompson for the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia (New York: University Press of America, 1986-1987). The classic study of presidential transitions is Laurin Henry, *Presidential Transitions* (Washington: Brookings, 1960).
2. If Governor Michael Dukakis had won, the transition teams in departments and agencies would have been considerably smaller than the Reagan teams: 2 to 5 people, rather than the 10 to 20 people of 1981. Conscious efforts would have been made to present a contrast with the 1980-1981 transition teams. Interview with Harrison Wellford, Washington, DC (24 October 1988).
3. Interview with Chase Untermeyer, The White House (6 June 1989).
4. The phrase is *New York Times* columnist William Safire's.
5. Reagan's statement was "Sometimes I wonder if they really want what they say want, because some of those leaders are doing very well leading organizations based on keeping alive the feeling that

- they're victims of prejudice," as quoted by Elizabeth Drew in "Letter From Washington," *The New Yorker* (27 February 1989), p. 78.
6. *U.S. News and World Report* (17 April 1989), p. 22; *Newsweek* (17 April 1989), p. 21.
 7. Eleanor Randolph, "Quieting the White House Press With Access," *The Washington Post* (12 March 1989), p. A6.
 8. Burt Solomon, "Bush's Disdain for Image Making May Come to Plague His Tenure," *National Journal* (11 March 1989), p. 602.
 9. See Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "A Note from Saddle River," *The Washington Post* (10 April 1989), p. A9. See also *The Washington Post* (11 April 1989) p. A17, for Marlin Fitzwater's reaction to the situation.
 10. See "Building a Better America," White House summary of the first 100 days of the Administration (24 April 1989).
 11. David Gergen, "George Bush's Balky Start," *U.S. News & World Report* (30 January 1989), p. 34.
 12. "Bush's Plea: 'A Lot is Happening,'" *Newsweek* (20 March 1989), p. 26.
 13. Interview with H. R. Haldeman, Los Angeles (25 May 1983).
 14. Quoted by David Hoffman, "Bush: Making Himself Up as He Goes Along," *The Washington Post* (13 August 1989), p. B4.
 15. See David Gergen, "George Bush's Balky Start," *U.S. News and World Report* (30 January 1989), p. 34.
 16. For contrasting perspectives on the chief of staff issue, see articles by Richard Neustadt and Bruce Buchanan in James P. Pfiffner, ed., *The Managerial Presidency* (Pacific Grove, CA: Book/Cole, forthcoming).
 17. See "Transition Watch," *New York Times* (8 December 1988), p. B20. See also Ann Devroy, "Sununu Swiftly Backpedals on Size of His White House Role," *The Washington Post* (9 December 1988), p. A9.
 18. Quoted in the *New York Times* (13 September 1989), p. A18.
 19. See Fred Barnes, "Sununu and Improved," *The New Republic* (29 May 1989), p. 13.
 20. Michael Duffy, "Mr. Consensus," *Time* (21 August 1989), p. 18.
 21. David Gergen, "Bush's Start: A Presidency 'On the Edge of a Cliff,'" *The Washington Post* (5 March 1989), p. C1.
 22. *The Washington Post* (13 January 1989), p. A16.
 23. Burt Solomon, "When the Bush Cabinet Convenes...It's a Gathering of Presidential Pals," *The National Journal* (1 July 1989), p. 1704.
 24. Roger Porter, *Presidential Decision Making* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
 25. Quoted in *Time* (21 August 1989), p. 18.
 26. See Bernard Weinraub, "White House," *New York Times* (19 May 1989), p. A14.
 27. Owen Ullman, "Do Bush's People Have It?" *The Washingtonian* (June 1989), pp. 207-208.
 28. Hedrick Smith argues that "The Reagan Presidency has probably been simultaneously the most centralized and staff-dominated presidency in history." *The Power Game* (New York: Random House, 1988) p. 300.
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 30. National Academy of Public Administration, *A Presidency for the 1980s* (Washington: NAPA, 1988), ch. 2.
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 32. Quoted by Burt Solomon, "When the Bush Cabinet Convenes... It's a Gathering of Presidential Pals," *National Journal* (1 July 1989), p. 1704.
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